

THE NAZI WAR EAGLE WILL NOT RULE THE  
SKIES SO LONG AS THERE IS...

# BLACKHAWK™



by WILLIAM ROTSLER

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*Rings*

*"Hauptmann* von Tepp, you are my prisoner," said the man in black leather. "Hand over your weapon."

The Baron was astonished. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. A von Tepp did not surrender, a von Tepp *took* surrenders! His hand clawed at his holster flap.

The black-clad figure did not even move as the Walther cleared leather.

*Whannng!*

A shot ripped the handgun from the German's hand. It came from the wall, and von Tepp stared upward, his wrenched hand stinging.

Around the wall, like black birds of prey, stood five men in black leather uniforms, hawk symbols on their chests. Each cradled an American weapon, a Thompson sub-machine gun, each with the standard 30-round drum of .38 caliber cartridges.

"You see, my dear von Tepp," the man before him said. "Resistance is quite useless."

"Who the devil are you?" the Prussian demanded.

"Call me... Blackhawk."

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**WILLIAM ROTSLER**



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for Len Wein, Marv Wolfman and Mark Evanier,  
necessarily in that order, for the chance to  
fight World War II again.

**BLACKHAWK™**

# Chapter One

---

*1 September 1939*

At 0455 hours the forces of the Third Reich invaded the country of Poland without a formal declaration of war. The operation was code-named *Fall Weiss*, or Plan White. General Brauchitsch was commander in chief of 53 divisions of crack troops, fresh from the destruction of tiny Czechoslovakia.

Air support came from General Albert Kesselring's and General Lohr's air fleets of 1,600 aircraft. Rundstedt led Army Group South and Bock commanded Army Group North.

Against this greatest army in the world were but 23 regular infantry divisions of the Polish Army, an inadequate supply of artillery, one weak armored division, and a considerable force of cavalry. All 500 airplanes of the Polish Air Force were obsolete and unable to do anything significant against the vastly superior forces of the Luftwaffe. Under Herman Goring and with the support of the Nazis they entered the war with 21 squadrons, 1,180 bombers, 366 dive bombers, 1,179 fighters and about a thousand other planes.

The Polish commander in chief, Marshal Rydz-Smigly deployed his forces as best he could, but the German juggernaut rolled right on. The superior equipment and training of the German forces, plus their much greater strength, won them all the early battles. The greatest war in history had begun.

Outside Frankfurt, Germany, at the Luftwaffe airbase a young lieutenant jumped out of the front seat of the gray-green Volkswagen Kubelwagen and took a moment to tug at his blue-grey uniform. Captain von Tepp was a stickler for proper protocol for his junior officers.

Lieutenant Miller briefly touched his left breast. Someday there would be medals there, and at his throat, the Iron Cross. There would be glory for all in this most glorious of wars. The Fiihrer was right, he thought. It *was* Germany's destiny to rule the world.

Miller felt proud and confident as he returned the salute of the *feldwebel* at the door and pushed through to enter the 13 th Squadron's headquarters. The message he carried from communications was important. But more important, perhaps it would take the 13th from reserve status and put it into the forefront of the *blitzkrieg* that was pounding triumphantly across the flat potato fields of Poland.

"*Leutnant* Miller to see *Hauptmann* von Tepp," he said arrogantly to the



*oberfeldwebel* at the desk. He was proud of his arrogance. It has just the right edge to it, he thought. He had patterned his manner after *Hauptmann* von Tepp, the very model of the new Prussian officer: modern and ruthless, just like Germany itself.

"Ja, *leutnant*," the heavysset man said as he stood up.

Von Tepp watched with his usual contempt while his young officer entered the room. Miller did not take it personally. The dapper captain looked at everyone with contempt. He had once even seen von Tepp looking at his own father—Friedrich von Tepp, the hero-general of World War I—with barely concealed contempt.

The silver wings on von Tepp's right breast glittered as he turned, the monocle in his left eye gleaming. "Yes?" he snapped, returning Miller's salute briskly. A cigarette curled smoke from his left hand. His hair was trimmed so short that he seemed to be bald almost to the crown of his bullet-shaped head, where a few tight dark curls were permitted to remain.

"A radiogram from headquarters, sir," Miller said. "The Polish armies are in retreat, but their air force continues to harass our advance."

"So?"

"Orders, sir!" Miller said eagerly, unable to contain his delight. "We are to join our glorious Luftwaffe in crushing the upstart Poles!"

Von Tepp fixed him with a hawklike gaze. "Even inferior races can inflict damage, *Leutnant* Miller. Rats will fight if cornered." He crashed out his cigarette and his voice slashed out like a whip. "*Herzll*"

The sergeant-major appeared in the doorway at once. "*Jawohl, Hauptmann?*"

"Sound the alert! We go into action at once!"

"*Jawohl, Hauptmann*," the non-com answered, "*Heil* Hitler!"

"*Heil* Hitler," von Tepp answered, his eyes glittering. "At last," he murmured. "Well?" he glared at Miller. "Why are you standing there?"

Miller saluted. "*Heil* Hitler!"

Von Tepp reached for his gray leather gloves and slowly pulled them on. At last, he thought. The fools at headquarters had placed him in reserve, no doubt as punishment for his obvious contempt for their decision-making abilities. But now he was to be released.

Unfettered. Unchained. The hawk flies from the arm. There would be no turning back now.

Von Tepp strode out of the headquarters, absently returning the salutes of his men. His eyes were across the field, on the sleek, functional lines of his Messerschmitt Me 109. It was the best fighter plane in the world, he thought proudly. 357 miles an hour, with a range of 412 miles. And painted flat black.

The black color was an affectation, he knew, but it should prove an effective one. Only slightly more than twenty years before, the pilots on both sides in the Great War had personalized their planes, or did if they were of sufficient stature. The Red Baron, he thought. *There* was a man. There was a pilot!

In time *his* black plane would be legendary. Other pilots put on stars or flags to indicate their kills; he intended to paint a thin red stripe the length of the plane for each aircraft he destroyed—until the aircraft was blood red. Then as his kills mounted, he would paint black stripes— stripes of death— until the plane was black again.

After that, he thought, something else, something people would notice: skulls perhaps, stark white against the black, large enough to see at a distance. Something enemy pilots would fear.

Von Tepp climbed into the cockpit and started his pre-flight check. He had plans for his squadron as well. First of all, a name. He had the perfect name picked out— the Butcher Squadron. And now he was about to earn that name.

Warsaw was the target. The heart of the enemy.

No, he thought again. The *real* heart was London, then beyond. .. Moscow, New York, Washington. The vitals of the enemy. He grinned wolfishly as he pulled down his goggles. He would be there.

Karl Friedrich von Tepp. *Baron* Karl von Tepp. The Black Baron they would call him. And rightly so.

His Messerschmitt rolled out onto the field. He glanced around as his other planes assembled behind him. They knew better than to have engine trouble or be late. So did the ground crews.

He gunned his engine and the black plane moved down the field, gathering speed. The front wheels lifted and he was airborne.

Warsaw was the target.

The Poles were outnumbered four-to-one, but still they kept coming. Reluctantly, Baron von Tepp had to admire them. It was foolish, he thought. They faced certain death against the superior force, the better planes. But the fate of Europe roared through the clouds over the Bzura River.

They must be crushed without mercy, von Tepp thought. The only man in the world toward whom von Tepp felt awe had said so. Adolf Hitler knew. If the first days of the war saw the enemy's defenses crumble helplessly, if the armies and air forces surrendered or died ignominiously, the next enemy would be stricken with fear and fold even quicker.

But not *too* soon, thought von Tepp. There must be glory, and there was no glory in battling contemptuous swine who fell to their knees at the first sight of the glorious Wehrmacht.

The camouflaged planes of the Polish Air Force rose to meet the incoming German squadron. Teeth bared in a fierce grin, von Tepp proceeded to down the ships, one by one. He hardly left an enemy for the rest of his squadron to kill. It was with a conscious effort that he permitted half the squadron to pursue the remaining wounded remnants of the Polish resistance. He looked at his gas gauge. Plenty of fuel, enough for another long sweep around Warsaw to clean up the stragglers. Then he would expend any remaining ammunition in straffing the highways clogged with refugees.

*Blap! Blap! Blap!*

Von Tepp stared in amazement at the holes which appeared in the thin metal skin of his plane. He swiveled his head around to see the blur of a single Polish aircraft thunder by. The enemy ship banked, and bullets ripped through the fuselage of one of the marauding German Messerschmitts.

With a curse von Tepp banked over and went in furious pursuit. *The impertinent fool!*

Von Tepp flew through the thick oily smoke of his falling comrade's plane, his thumb upon the firing stud of his machine guns. But the Pole had disappeared!

The tight German formation dissolved as each of the Nazi pilots sought to find and destroy the last of the Polish fighters. Von Tepp squinted into the sun, the ultimate and usual direction from which all attackers had come in the short but bloody history of combat in the air. But he saw nothing.

Then his wingman exploded, flaming shards of aircraft falling backwards and down, toward the green countryside.

The solitary Polish airplane had come up from below, the obsolete aircraft laboring, but its guns dead accurate. Baron von Tepp banked hard, quick on the tail of the one who had brought first blood to the 13th Squadron.

His thumb pressed the stud as the laboring Polish ship swam into the sights. *Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam, blam, blam, blam, blam!*

Von Tepp saw his bullets stitch a dotted line across the right wing of the aging P.Z.L. P-11 fighter, but the pilot was already slipping away to the left, evading him.

Von Tepp growled a Teutonic curse and followed, his bullets hammering the air just behind the Pole. Then another of von Tepp's squadron came up from the left, guns chattering

Astoundingly, the Pole did not try to evade, but instead aimed straight for the German. Von Tepp saw the pilot falter, then drop away. The Pole twisted his plane almost magically and the roles were reversed—it was the Pole stinging fifty caliber slugs into the German. Smoke streamed out, then flame, and as von Tepp turned he saw the canopy slide back. Miller was going to jump.

The Pole went up, and over, in a tight Ernmelman, and von Tepp had a sudden chill. *The Pole was behind him!* He slammed the Messerschmitt 109 into a turn, then converted it into a stall. At the peak of the stall he twisted the aircraft and dropped, coming out on the tail of the rampaging Polish flyer, who was already pounding slugs into the side of another of the German Air Force's prize ships. The Messerschmitt exploded and the Pole flew right through the explosion.

Von Tepp's jaw was painfully tight as he wrenched his craft into pursuit, cursing. The Polish plane was half a decade older, obsolete and underpowered. It was ridiculous that it had destroyed three of the Third Reich's best!

Then the Polish plane caught fire. A thin stream of smoke came from the single overloaded engine. Von Tepp's face, a deathmask of anger, lighted with a fierce scowl. His machine guns thundered again, but the Pole was sideslipping away. The ship headed toward the countryside below, the smoke thickening.

*Got him!* von Tepp exulted.

He followed the Polish plane down, still trying to get another burst into it. But the plane slipped and banked, making it an elusive target. Getting dangerously close to the ground, von Tepp pulled up to watch the Pole crash.

Farmland. Crops with diagonal streaks of tank tracks. A small stone farmhouse with pig pens and a timber barn. The Pole put his ship down almost in the yard, the wheels up, slithering through the mud, whipping around to come to rest sideways from the landing path.

Von Tepp saw the tiny figure jump out and run toward the farmhouse. His lips parted in a ruthless smile. "That will do you no good, *liebchen*," he said softly, banking his Messerschmitt sharply.

The bomb was a small one, for fighters only carried them on occasion to further destroy air fields after straffing runs. A small bomb, but it was a small farm house.

Von Tepp began his dive.

The pilot of the Polish fighter staggered as he ran across the farmyard. Blood ran down his face from where his forehead had hit the canopy as he crash-landed. On his chest was the blood-splattered insigne of the Polish Air Force—a dove with a laurel wreath in its beak and lightning bolts in its claws.

Then his plane exploded.

The P.Z.L. P-11 sent flaming fragments of itself everywhere, the clap of its explosion merging with the screaming roar of the diving Messerschmitt Me 109.

The explosion sent the bleeding pilot crashing into the muddy ground. He lay, stunned, half-blinded by the blood. He raised his head and shook it. His ears rang and his vision was blurred but he knew what he was looking at.

The farmhouse of his youth.

Instinctively, he had headed for it, with the German eagle in pursuit. He had run once before, as a child, when the Germans had come in the Great War, the War to End Wars.

Home, the cellar, the secret cellar-within-a-cellar built by his great-grandfather.

Home, where Jack and Connie were, his brother and sister.

Home, where he would be safe.

He started to rise, head spinning, the shrieking in his head growing by the second.

The Hun!

The Messerschmitt plummeted downward, straight at the pilot on the

ground. Von Tepp's face distorted in a grimace as he began to pull up.

The bomb release was tripped.

The small bomb dropped away.

The German rose, fighting the gravity that pulled at his body, until he could look down at the tumbling bomb.

The house exploded.

It was just as the son of Mussolini had said about the bombs in Ethiopia. They were like flowers. Brown and black flowers, erupting skyward.

He saw the dissolution of the stone structure and the tiny figure of the pilot flung back almost from the doorway, to lie still and dead in the mud.

With a smirk von Tepp took the Messerschmitt into the sky: the victor's sky. He headed toward rendezvous, the downed Polish pilot now nothing but another red stripe on his plane.

It was nearing sunset when the pilot stirred.

Everything hurt.

The blood on his face had clotted, but it felt as if he had been beaten with boards by a mob. He pulled himself free of the mud with a vile sucking sound and looked up.

Wisps of smoke rose from the collapsed farmhouse.

Farmhouse, he thought blankly. What was he doing at a farmhouse?

No, not *a* farmhouse, *the* farmhouse!

It all came back in a tidal wave of fear.

*Connie and Jack!*

He staggered to his feet, his brown uniform in tatters. The door frame still stood, blackened by fire, but not much of the house was left. The bomb had gone through the roof and exploded inside, shoving the walls outward, bringing down the roof.

*Connie! Jack!*

"Where are you?" he called, the wisps of smoke curling around him as he stood in the doorway. "Jack! Connie!" There was still a fire going in the bedroom, or what was left of his parents' bedroom. Suddenly it caught, flaring anew as it reached a chest of clothes.

He heard a groan and shoved through the splintered rafters toward the inside entrance to the cellar. If they were anywhere they'd be in the secret cellar, he thought.

If they had time.

He saw the red dress first. Connie, the blood dark on the crimson of her favorite dress.

"H-here I am..." came the weak voice of his brother. The blood-speckled pilot shoved aside a fallen table and saw his brother lying, broken and twisted, on the floor.

There was broken glass and shattered plaster all around, the small library of his father torn and scattered. And his sister lay with such unnatural stillness.

"It's no use, brother," Jack whispered as he saw the pilot bending over Connie. "She was k-killed instantly..." He coughed and a foam of blood came to his lips.

The pilot scrambled to his brother's side. He heard the crackling of the flames as the fire grew in intensity. He started to lift his brother, but the injured man put up a hand.

"I'm... about done in... save... save y-yourself..."

The pilot uttered a savage cry of anger and frustration. If only he had not landed here! If only he had not subconsciously headed for home! If only he had not seen the war coming and had never come home from America to fight! If only his brother and sister had gone when the others had gone, fleeing from the tank-led armies of the hated Boche!

If only ...

He took his brother in his arms, lifting him tenderly. "Come on," he said, "I'll get you to a hospital! There's got to be someone!"

"It's no use," his brother sighed.

*The dog!* the pilot thought, looking up through the shattered roof at the sky. *The dirty, black-hearted dog! Bombing innocent civilians!*

No, in this war, he told himself, there will be no innocents, only victims and victors. Everyone must choose a side against something as monstrous as the Nazi beasts!

"The German ..." his brother sighed as he was carried out into the muddy yard. "Get him... get him for us, brother..."

"I will, Jack, I swear."

"Get him for Connie ... sweet Connie ..."

Jack's head went limp and the pilot gasped. "Jack!" He shook him, then lay his bloody brother down on the dirt. "Jack!"

But he knew death when he saw it.

People were so still in death, so terribly, permanently *still*.

The pilot rose to his feet, his fists clenched. "You," he said toward the east. "You killed him, you in the black plane!" And in his heart he swore a mighty oath.

"I will kill you," he promised the distant German. "I will kill you and all of those dogs like you! I will fight the Nazi until I am killed or we have won! This I *swear!*"

There were two new graves on the small hill near the copse of old trees. Among the stone markers of ancestors were now two simple crosses, fashioned from strips of twisted and burnt metal from his plane. They marked his brother and sister.

The pilot looked at them a long time, then got up from his knees and began to walk. The Germans were coming from the east and south, but there were rumors of other forces lancing into the flesh of Poland from other directions.

Warsaw. He would go to Warsaw and make his plans.

They were very personal plans. The Polish Air Force would not approve of personal vendettas, that he knew. But he couldn't help it. He needed revenge for his brother and sister.

And for that the Polish pilot knew he must die. He must disappear, and escape military authority. His brother Jack wouldn't mind the identity tags the pilot left hanging on his cross.

The pilot was gone and in his place was... whom?

It must be a name that would strike fear into the Hun. A name that would be his new identity and would define that identity.

He would use what he knew to fight his own private war with the Nazi scum. He would drop on them like a falcon upon a pigeon, rending and killing. From out of the sky would come the grim black defender, a hawk on the prowl, a—a black hawk.

Blackhawk!

He raised his head at the sound of a wing of dreaded German Junk dive bombers passing high overhead. He scowled at the Ju-88s far out of his reach.

He would need a plane. The *best* plane.

He would need men on his wing, good men, dedicated men who would have only one thought—destroy the Nazi.

He would need a support group, a base, somewhere out of reach of the Germans... and equally the Poles and the Allies.

He trudged on. He'd find all that. He didn't know how, but he would. Perhaps in America; dear, isolationist America, where he had grown up. Somewhere among those hundred million people must be someone Who could help, someone whose hatred of the Nazi regime equalled his own.

The mud sucked at his shoes, but he trudged on. Don't die until I get back, he said mentally to the pilot of the black plane. You must not die until I return.

*Then you will surely die.*

## Chapter Two

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*26 September 1939*

The Germans were bombing Warsaw on a steady basis. Hitler urged his commanders to complete the conquest as soon as possible. The British battleship *Ark Royal* had been sunk. Russia was fighting disorganized forces of the Polish Army near the Hungarian border, helping Germany as part of

their nefarious pact. It was hardly the first time Russia had invaded Poland. President Moscicki and Commander in Chief Rydz-Smigly had entered Rumania and were interned three days before. The man to be known as Blackhawk, using his American passport, got aboard an airplane to England.

*3 October 1939*

The British Expeditionary Forces had taken over responsibility for a section of the Franco-Belgian border. The last significant remnants of the Polish Army surrendered near Luck. The Germans had taken 700,000 prisoners and the Soviets had captured 200,000. British and French naval forces were searching for the Graf Spee, the deadly German pocket battleship. Blackhawk boarded a passenger ship filled with refugees, headed toward the United States of America, an oasis of peace in a world gone mad.

*15 October 1939*

The British battleship *Royal Oak* was sunk at anchor in the main fleet base at Scapa Flow by the submarine U-47, commanded by *Kapitanleutnant* Prien. Hitler had made a speech the week before, proclaiming Ms desire for peace with Britain and France. He said that up to now he had done nothing more than correct the unjust Versailles Treaty and that he had no war aims against either France or Britain. The Reich leader blamed warmongers like Winston Churchill for all the trouble. Blackhawk saw the Statue of Liberty at the entrance to New York Harbor.

The offices of Levitz, Cuidera and Dillin were distinguished and oak-paneled. The secretaries were all well-dressed, with either cMc upswept hairdos or pageboy cuts captured in equally fashionable snoods, the ornamental netlike coverings for hair. There was a discreet tapping of typewriter keys as Blackhawk waited impatiently in the outer office.

He glanced at the clock on the wall, near the large oil portrait of the founder of the firm, the father of the present Levitz. He had been waiting almost an Hour.

One more hour that the Nazi machine can race across Europe, he thought gloomily. But what did he expect, coming in without an appointment to one of New York's biggest financiers?

"Sir?" He looked up as the secretary spoke to Mm. She smiled politely. "Mister Levitz will see you now. That door there."

"Thank you," he said automatically and rose, pulling Ms overcoat tight around Mm. It was too warm to wear the coat and—to be frank—he felt odd dressed the way he was in the midst of New York's financial district, But he needed every edge he could muster.

The door was richly paneled, as was the office of the smiling personal secretary beyond. She held open the door to the inner office. "Would you like



some coffee, sir?" He shook his head.

The man behind the desk was much younger than he had imagined. Somehow he thought of a millionaire financier as being much older, gray or white-headed, distinguished and imposing.

But Marvin Levitz was almost the same age as Blackhawk, a thin, dark-haired man with a moustache, large eyes and a wide smile. He rose as Blackhawk entered. He spoke Blackhawk's real name warmly. "I remember your father well," he said, offering a chair. "Please, take off your coat and tell me how I may help you."

Blackhawk shook his head, indicating he'd keep his coat on, and sat on the edge of the offered chair. He felt uncomfortable. In the air, even on a battlefield, he might be scared half to death, but he would not have felt uncomfortable.

But here, in the booklined room, with the antique furniture, the brass lamp, the expensive rug, he felt out of place. What he proposed seemed futile. How could he, a lone man, go up against the armored might of the German forces?

But there was no harm trying.

If you didn't count losing your life, that is.

Or dying in some Gestapo torture chamber.

Or worse, if that was possible.

The expectant expression on the face of the youthful Levitz prompted him. "Sir, I.. ."

"Call me Marv, everyone does," he smiled, attempting to put the stranger at ease. "I mentioned your father, but you did not say ..."

"My father is dead, sir. Uh, Marv."

"I am sorry."

"Yes, well. That is not the reason I came here. There is something I want from you."

"Blunt, but not unexpected," Levitz smiled. He gestured around the room. "I use money to make money. And jobs. And opportunity. So people only come here for three reasons .. . money . . . information ... or revenge."

Blackhawk blinked. "Revenge?"

Levitz shrugged. "Business is life, and people get hurt in life. Some want revenge. They think they can use me for one or the other." He raised his eyebrows in a question.

Blackhawk cleared his throat. "Sir, I..." Levitz smiled and raised a slim finger. "Uh, Marvin... I understand you have no liking for what is going on in Germany."

"That is true. Nor should any peace-loving person, but what does that have to do with why you are here?"

"Your family .. ."

Levitz's face grew hard, his smile dying. "Yes?"

"They died in Germany in 1932."

Levitz nodded. "They were killed by the Brown Shirts, yes. I barely

escaped. I was visiting there with . . . with my father."

"How would you like revenge?"

The young financier sat back and stared at Blackhawk for a long moment. "What did you have in mind?" He stopped any response with a quick gesture. "This is my country. It is at peace, young sir. I'll not help drag it into a war. Even a war against Nazis."

Blackhawk nodded. "I understand. Let me first tell you of my recent past." In terse, short sentences, spoken without emotion, Blackhawk spoke of enlisting in the Polish Air Force, the beginning of the war and the deaths of his brother and sister.

"In London I found the name of the squadron leader in that area that day was a Baron Karl von Tepp. I intend to kill him. Then to kill every Nazi I find."

Levitz steepled his fingers and stared at the dark carved ceiling. "There is the RAF. Eventually—though I hope not—this country may be drawn in, so there is the United States Air Corps. Or the Canadians. There is talk of a Free Poland squadron under RAF control." His eyes went to Blackhawk.

"Yes, I know. I'm afraid... they are bound by the Geneva Convention ... by traditional rules of war ... by ... by mercy."

The millionaire looked at the young man across his desk for a long time. "You are thinking of going into business for yourself, is that it?" Blackhawk nodded. "A kind of privateer, perhaps?"

"But not for gain," Blackhawk said. "At least not financial gain. Which is why I need money."

"Ah," Levitz said, smiling.

"I need someone to provide support... planes, fuel, ammunition, a base."

Levitz's eyebrows went up. "Your own private air corps?"

"A small one." He reached into his pocket and took out a sheet of paper. "Here's an estimate, though I suppose the prices will be going up as the war goes on."

Levitz nodded and took the paper. He studied it a moment without expression, then put it on his desk. "What can you do that, say, the Royal Air Force cannot do?"

"The British Commando units in training are just that kind of force. Once the war really gets going I think they will be highly efficient. Hard, fast, concentrated strikes at specific important targets. You see that we will have only seven planes, seven members. At least to start."

"And replacements, *and* a ground crew, *and* fuel, *and* everything else you'd need for a private army," Levitz responded.

Blackhawk nodded. "I know it is asking a lot. You'll get nothing back but satisfaction. It might even be illegal, what we are proposing."

"Oh, I'm sure it is," Levitz smiled.

"Dangerous, too."

Levitz smiled again. "You seldom have *that* sort of danger on Wall Street,

unless there's another 1929 and you get hit by a falling stockbroker."

"Well?"

"Well?" Levitz said back. "You are asking me, is that it?" He tapped the paper. "It's a lot of money to start. And more to maintain. Illegal. Dangerous." He paused. "And kind of marvelous."

Blackhawk nodded. "Yes, sir, all of that."

"You'll not be able to operate except in the strictest secrecy. You'll need codes, code-names—" He waved his hand at the myriad of obstacles. Then he looked at Blackhawk again, at the handsome but grim visage. "But you've thought of all of that."

"Yes, sir. It won't be easy, but with your help ..."

Levitz sighed. "What else is there?"

Blackhawk stood up and unbuttoned his overcoat. Marvin Levitz's eyes grew larger as he stared at what was revealed as the young man shed his coat. Blackhawk took something from his overcoat pocket and shook it out, then put it on his head and stood while he was inspected by the amazed Levitz.

"I'll use the name Blackhawk," he said, "and we'll be the Blackhawks."

Beneath the overcoat was a black leather uniform. A wide-collared jacket with two rows of gold buttons fastening a flat across the wide chest. A large gold disc with the embossed head of a hawk was on his left breast and the disc had wings. Another hawk-headed disc, made into a buckle, held a black leather belt around his trim waist and there was a 9mm automatic in a holster on the belt. A visored black cap with another golden hawk symbol sat upon his dark hair and a yellow silk scarf was knotted around his neck. Flaring jodhpurs and high black boots completed the startling costume.

"Blackhawk ..." Levitz said softly.

Blackhawk waited.

"There is an island in the Orkneys, north and west of Scotland," he said. "A company of mine owns it. Drab little place, fogged in most of the time, but it has an extraordinary flat top to it."

"Yes, sir?"

"There are two ships, the *Seabird* and the *Seahawk*, which belong to a company I happen to own a rather large percentage of. Appropriate names, don't you think?" He smiled softly. "Their normal, peace-time routes are up through the English Channel, stopping at Edinburgh, then back out the Firth of Forth and up to pass beneath the Orkneys and down to Ireland. Then here to the United States. Then back to Portsmouth and so forth, on up the British east coast."

He stopped and looked at Blackhawk with a bland expression. "I would not be the least surprised if within a fortnight, as the British say, there would not be a shipment of fighter planes aboard one of those freighters, along with this and that. Do you think there might be an airfield by the time they get to ... to Blackhawk Island?"

A smile broke across Blackhawk's face, the first smile he had experienced

in weeks. He stuck out his hand. "Sir . . . there will be a field!"

"Going to carve it out of the rock with your bare hands?" Levitz smiled.

"No. I have a friend named Stanislaus. He's a Pole. I'll start with him. We'll get others."

"I'm sure you will, " Levitz smiled, rising from his seat. "You got me easily enough." Then he raised a warning finger. "I am not doing this solely because of my family," he said, "nor because of your tragedy. I am doing it because it must be done. This country has been very good to me. If I can help stop these madmen before the war comes to these shores, then I will be repaid enough."

Blackhawk nodded. "You'll not regret it." He gave the surprised Levitz a sharp salute, then shrugged back into his overcoat as Levitz rang for a secretary.

"Miss Anderson. I want to dictate a letter of authorization. And call Mister Behr in communications for a map to our Orkney holdings."

"Yes, Mister Levitz."

The young financier looked at Blackhawk. "Come back tomorrow and I'll have everything ready."

"I'll come back this afternoon," he said. "Tomorrow I plan to be on Pan Am to London."

Levitz nodded. "Of course."

Blackhawk left and Levitz sat down, a little amazed at what he had committed himself to do.

But more than a little pleased, too.

Blackhawk looked at the six men before him. They were a strange and varied lot. Stanislaus had been the first, an old friend from the days in the Polish Air Force, who had fled to England and refused to surrender. Finding him had been difficult, but not impossible. It was the others that had taken the time.

And time was something they had little of.

Hendrickson had been the second enlisted. He was an older man, white-haired, with a great walrus moustache, a Dutchman who had flown with the French in the '14-'18 war. Too old for this war, the "young men's war," as they said, he was still eager to fight.

Then had come Andre, the dapper pilot with the between-war experience of using all kinds of construction machinery. He'd be in charge of clearing the ground and creating the airfield. He had been not long before in the French air forces, but had resigned during a scandal involving an old general's young wife. With the moustached Frenchman came rumors of subterfuge involving more than his romantic exploits. He had thrice bilked German agents out of funds, promising but not delivering French secrets. Every sou had been spent on the fair sex.

The fourth man was the Swedish giant, who went by the name of Olaf. He had been in a flying circus, and before that in a regular circus, as an acrobat. Every time Blackhawk looked at this heavily-muscled man he could not help

thinking that Andre should have been the acrobat and Olaf the construction worker, but such was life.

Then they had recruited Chuck, the Texan who'd come to England to enlist in the RAF. But the Blackhawks had gotten to him first, and convinced him his naturally rebellious spirit would wither and die within the confines of officialdom. He had turned out to be a remarkable man with anything electrical, whether engines or this new science called electronics.

But the last recruit confounded Blackhawk most of all. He wasn't even a pilot. He was Chinese, with rather in-adequate English, and his sole reason for enlisting seemed to be the love of adventure. His Chinese name was almost unpronounceable to their tongues, so they called him Chop-Chop.

Even more surprising was that, on the ground, he was perhaps the most deadly of them all. He was an ardent practitioner of what Andre had mistakenly called judo, but was actually, according to Chop-Chop, a Korean fighting art called karate. Whatever it was called, the slim Chinese had put every single one of them down with what seemed like effortless grace.

The Blackhawks.

Seven men from six countries. They weren't soldiers, they weren't mercenaries, but each had his reason for fighting the Nazis. It didn't matter to Blackhawk *why* they were willing to risk their lives. It only mattered that they would ... and that while doing it they would be the most professional, the most dangerous men he could count on.

The Blackhawks. And ahead of them was Blackhawk Island.

The small Scottish coaster steamer chugged through the fog. The captain had been easy to fix. "Hush-hush," you know, he had told the Scot, who had been eying the civilians warily.

Andre sidled up to the Blackhawk at the railing. "The fog, m'sieu," he said softly, shrugging.

"Our... benefactor ... told me that from sea level it looks as though the entire island is swaddled in fog most of the time ... but from the air ... well, the plateau lies just above the fog, at least most of the time. Everyone will know the island is there ... but they won't think ..."

Blackhawk left the sentence unfinished. They all knew the risks. A secret, *unauthorized* base practically on the front stoop of Scotland and a short flight from Germany. Their only hope was to cut their engines while still some distance from Blackhawk Island and glide in. Takeoffs would be tricky, and far noisier, but there was no help for that. Fortunately, the prevailing winds were away from the Scottish coast, which was some distance to the west.

Then the island loomed up, a darker grey in the fog. The ship's telegraph sounded and the vessel began to slow.

One bulldozer, Blackhawk thought. One truck. Some prefab huts, food, supplies and one radio. The rest was coming in two weeks, on the *Seahawk*.

The anchor rumbled down. The launch was put over the ship and Blackhawk and the Scottish captain got into it. They had to investigate the

long-neglected dock, to see if it was able to be used.

Blackhawk fidgeted impatiently as the launch crossed the choppy North Sea waters. Everything was taking so much time. He longed to be in the air, guns chattering, hard on the tail of a Nazi killer.

Any Nazi, but most especially the one known as von Tepp.

## Chapter Three

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The Blackhawks stared at the crated airplanes in dismay. Somehow they had expected the aircraft to come off the ship whole, fueled and ready, the guns loaded.

But instead they had wingless fuselages, engines in other crates, wings in long boxes, spare parts in others. Andre chuckled and Olaf glared at him. "Well, vot is zo funny, Froggy?"

"Ah, my Norseman friend, is it not amusing? A kit. A kit for an air corps."

None of the others found it amusing, however, and Blackhawk walked over and warily eyed the ground crew at the end of the dock.

"Herron? You can call me Blackhawk."

A tough-looking middle-aged man in overalls nodded, his eyes taking in Blackhawk's uniform.

"You're the supervisor of the ground crew?"

Herron nodded. "Yup. And we have some questions," he began.

Blackhawk interrupted him. "I am certain you do. But first, we must get these crates from the dock to up there," he said, pointing to where the Blackhawks had scraped and filled, making a rough landing field. It aimed into the prevailing wind, which was from the northwest, and even now Chop-Chop and Hendrickson were painting camouflage blots across the raw earth and rock, blending it into the harsh Scottish island.

"Sir, when Mister Levitz hired us—"

"Herron, when Mister Levitz hired you, it was to do a job, and that job was to be supervised by me, is that not so?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"No buts, Mister Herron. You are getting danger pay, correct?"

"Yeah, but none of us want to do anything..." He hesitated, glancing at his comrades. "Anything wrong," he finished.

"We are here to fight Nazis," Blackhawk said. "We must have a ground support organization to keep these planes flying. You have all tried to enlist, correct?" Before any of them could nod, Blackhawk continued. "You are either too young, too old or in some way physically disabled ... unacceptable

to regular military forces." They all looked bleakly back at him.

"Well, we are not conventional military forces," Blackhawk said. "We are independents, outside the control of anyone. On our own. With but one purpose ... the defeat of Nazi Germany!"

The ground crew nodded slowly. "Aye," said one of the young ones. "But how do we know—"

"That we are Nazi-fighters?" Blackhawk snapped. "By getting these planes in the air and seeing our kills!"

Herron looked at the others and shrugged. "Let's give it a whirl, lads." He gave Blackhawk a casual, two-fingered salute. "We'll keep them flying for you, Blackhawk."

Stanislaus raised his eyebrows. "The planes, they are black," he said, touching the sleek surface of the Grumman Skyrocket. It was the first two-engine, single-seated fighter made in America, the Grumman XF5-F1. Levitz had arranged for the aircraft—officially still in the testing phase—to be "independently tested," and that meant by the Blackhawks, through a cover organization. The single-wing ships were fast and had very prominent tails. Black-hawk's personal craft had been modified to carry two people.

"Yes," Blackhawk said. "We'll be flying both day and night."

Unspoken was a thought that had been nagging at the Polish pilot's mind. Will we become as bestial as the Nazi? Lowering ourselves to fight as they fight? To fly a black plane like von Tepp? To *become* as von Tepp in order to combat him?

Blackhawk smiled. There was one thing he had learned. You never fight by the other man's rules. You either fight under commonly accepted rules, established by law ... or you fight by *your* rules and your rules only. You select the time and place, commando style, guerilla style.

You used whatever you had, and the Blackhawks did not have much. Not now, anyway. They had excellent planes and extraordinary flying skills—their fearlessness sometimes bordered on the suicidal. They would hit and run, black hawks that dropped from the clouds to kill.

Yes, the ships had to be black. "Get 'em flying," he told Herron.

### *1 December 1939*

The Russo-Finnish War began the day before. The Battle of the Atlantic had begun. France and England prepared for the worst, with Prime Minister Chamberlain reporting to King George VI. The Blackhawks took off, rising above the fog-shrouded island and toward the continent of Europe.

Hendrickson looked down at the flat plains of the Netherlands below, homesickness in his heart. They could not defend themselves against the Nazi horde, he knew. They had spent centuries being merchants, explorers, farmers and businessmen, not soldiers. He sighed as he remembered the pageants and

festivals of his youth, the gaiety and beer. That time was gone forever. Whatever this war would bring, it was also closing a door to the past. The world would never be the same again.

Hendrickson ran fingers through his thick walrus moustache. Too old to fight, they said. Hah! He would show these young fools! He was still as good as he had been when he flew with the French against the Boche in the Great War. Fourteen kills confirmed, at least nine others unconfirmed. He knew what it was like.

These planes were faster, better, with more armament and greater complexity, but ultimately it was man against man: your skills and daring against his.

Hendrickson patted the side of the sleek, fast ship. A good ship, unbloodied but eager. And he, old and bloodied, but just as eager.

On patrol with the Blackhawks.

The first patrol, the first mission.

Find von Tepp and destroy him.

The flight of Heinkel One-Elevens appeared out of the clouds below. "Where are the escorts?" Chuck said over the radio. "Y'all figger they're alone?" Then he answered his own question. "Naw, they're 'round here sumwhars." He began scanning the sky above them, squinting into the morning sun.

It was Chop-Chop who saw them first. He was riding in Blackhawk's plane in back of the seat. His breath hissed in as he saw the wings of Messerschmitts through a clearing in the clouds.

"Blockhawk, look! See?"

The fighters had seen them, Blackhawk was certain, but still they did not attack. We're a wild card, he thought. They aren't certain just who we are, but it won't take them long.

It didn't. The green-camouflaged planes peeled off. The Blackhawks could see the black crosses over the larger white crosses on their wings and tails.

"Let's bag a few bombers before we tangle!" Black-hawk said. He thumbed a switch that tuned the radio automatically to the Luftwaffe combat channel and for the first time uttered the piercing cry of the attacking hawk right into the startled ears of the German pilots.

"Hawk-aa-iii—!"

The Blackhawks peeled off in attack formation, the German fighters coming down at them, and dove straight at the nine Heinkels below.

Seven planes against nine bombers and nine fighters.

Blackhawk's eight machine guns thundered from the wings of his airship, his first retaliatory strike against the Hun.

A Heinkel's long glass bomber pilot's canopy exploded in a shower of shattered glass. The pilot was thrown back, his body stitched with lead. The plane veered sharply, dropping away.

The starboard wingman to the stricken leader burst into flame as



Hendrickson's fifty caliber slugs ripped into the fuel tanks. On Blackhawk's port side Stanislaus' guns stapled a double row of holes across the wings of the surprised crew of another bomber carrying death to England.

Then the Messerschmitts were on them. Chuck, bringing up the rear in the V-formation, saw the fabric rip as German bullets hammered through his starboard wing. Automatically he broke formation, pulling up and away, and the dogfight was on.

The bombers flew on, for the moment unmolested. The bomber crews, in their heavyweight, fleeced-lined flying suits, began to sweat, despite the winter cold and high altitude. The attacking planes had been new, with a sinister lack of markings of any kind, and very swift in their maneuvers. If they were to vanquish the Messerschmitt escort they could return.

It was bad enough, they thought, that they must yet face the Spitfires ahead, then the anti-aircraft fire, and more Spitfires and Hurricanes going back to base. They did not need any secret weapons coming at them—or whatever the seven black planes were.

A dogfight is mayhem. While individual ships may engage in classic maneuvers with one or more other aircraft, the whole is total chaos: a three-dimensional cat's cradle of flight paths, bullet paths, smoke streams and screaming sounds interlacing and intersecting.

Blackhawk was on the tail of a Messerschmitt 109 with a squadron symbol on its side of a red cat with an arched back... and discovered another on *his* tail. The American plane executed a complete roll to escape the first fusillade from the plane behind him, but the plane he was tracking had gotten away. Blackhawk put his aircraft into a steep dive, trying to shake his pursuer. Totally by chance another Messerschmitt crossed his sights, banking away to escape Andre's fire.

Without thinking, Blackhawk thumbed his firing stud, sending a stream of lead into the green-blotched ship. "Sorry, *ami*," he said to Andre.

"Ah, the chance of the moment, *commandante*" Andre laughed. "These Boche, they are hard to resist killing, no?" The Frenchman banked off, in pursuit of other prey. "It does not matter who kills them, *bon ami*, only that they *are* killed."

The screaming dive brought Blackhawk dangerously close to the surface of the icy cold North Sea. It would take less than a minute to freeze a man to death in that water, he thought.

Behind him the dogged German had kept coming, guns firing intermittently, but without striking the target as Blackhawk slipped and turned. Then he started his pull-out.

The forces of gravity tugged at the blood in his brain, pulling it down. His sight blurred, and blackness closed in in great dark blobs. The metal of the ship screamed in anguish as the valiant engines sought to keep them from resting forever in the cold waters.

Unconsciousness came, then went in a second as he pulled out and up, propellers slicing into the chill winter air. Behind him, the German pilot, blinded in his ferocious pursuit, was unable to fight the blackness. His ship rolled over and plunged into the sea.

Blackhawk climbed back into the fight. The odds were now seven to six, as Hendrickson dispatched another Messerschmitt. The black-clad leader of the independent fighting team headed toward the melee where Stanislaus and Olaf were engaged with a slippery German, ignoring the Messerschmitts on their trail.

"Oooooo ..."

Blackhawk was startled at the voice at his ear, then remembered Chop-Chop in the seat behind him. "You all right?" he yelled over his shoulder.

"I go out," the Chinese said, looking around. "Nazzi go swimming?"

"Yup," Blackhawk answered. "Keep an eye on my tail, will you?"

"Yessir, Blockhawk."

Blackhawk smiled. The young Chinese was trying his best to get the English words correct, but he had some amusing lapses.

*Plup! Plup! Plup!* Blackhawk put the ship into a fast stall, pulling up as the German bullets plunged through his fuselage. The Messerschmitt shot by beneath them and Blackhawk dropped his nose, gunning the ship in pursuit.

"I thought you were looking after our tail," the group leader said over his shoulder.

"These Germans, their planes are as swift as the wind," Chop-Chop said apologetically. "I was looking back, he came from side."

The Messerschmitt ahead wiggled and wagged, but Blackhawk was tight on his tail. Then the German came into Blackhawk's sights and the machine guns sputtered bullets. Smoke poured from the aircraft and Blackhawk saw the pilot bank away to the east, his canopy shoved back. .

Poor sucker's going to take it as far as he can toward the Dutch coast, he thought. No one wants to jump into the North Sea. He may make it, Blackhawk thought.

Then they'll give him another plane.

He'll fly again.

To kill.

Blackhawk swung his ship in pursuit. This is not one that will live to fight another day, he thought.

His thumb pressed the firing stud.

"Whoopee!" Chuck yelled and all the other Blackhawks winced. "Looky that there!" he called out triumphantly. A Messerschmitt 109 was headed toward the water, a cloud of black oily smoke billowing from the single engine. There were a cluster of ragged holes in the fuselage right at the pilot's seat. No one was about to climb out of that seat.

"They're running!" Andre called out.

"Donnerwetter!" Hendrickson growled. "Dey are getting away!"

"Let them go!" Blackhawk ordered. "Get the bombers!"

Reluctantly, the Blackhawks let the German fighters escape and turned in pursuit of the bomber flight. Blackhawk smiled coldly. The survivors would tell the story, undoubtedly exaggerating, of the strange black planes which had attacked them. Like a pebble in still water, the word would spread through the Luftwaffe.

A secret Allied weapon. A new superplane piloted by superpilots; ghosts that disappeared in the fog. The seed of fear would be planted in the hearts of the Teutonic knights of the air. • The Blackhawks had tasted their first blood.

The bombers were just ahead. Even with their machine gun turrets they would already be frightened, knowing the strange new ebony ships had destroyed the fighter escort.

They came in high, then Blackhawk switched momentarily to the German channel to scream the call of the attacking Blackhawks. The dark ships banked and began their dive.

Olaf's plane wobbled in the air as they left the scene. Burning debris still fell toward the sea. Three German parachutes were fluttering down. None of the Heinkels had survived the repeated attacks of the Blackhawks, but every Blackhawk ship had puncture wounds.

It was the big Swede's ship that suffered most. The port engine sputtered and died, then caught and chugged on. There were long streaks of oil along the fuselage, gleaming against the dark paint. The other planes were throttled back, but Blackhawk eyed his fuel gauge warily. The pursuit and combat had been quite long. Most of their fuel was used up. There should be enough to get them back toward the Orkneys, back to base, but Chuck's ship had a fuel leak and Olaf was in serious trouble.

"Comrades," the big Swede said over the radio. "Dis is the end for Olaf. You were good companions. We struck back at de Boche. That is good."

"Olaf," Blackhawk began.

"No, Blackhawk, it is more important that you all live, to fight again. This ship is finished."

"Olaf," Chuck laughed, "if you say, 'Go on without me,' I'll know you've been seeing too many movies, boy!"

Blackhawk made his decision. "Hendrickson! You'll stay with me. Andre, you will lead everyone back to the island at once. Land and get out of the way. If I'm right we'll be coming in like a trio of rocks and won't have any time or fuel to wait around in a pattern."

"But, Blackhawk—" Stanislaus began.

"That is an *order!*" he snapped into the radio. "Move it!"

The other Blackhawks, gunned their ships and moved ahead, while Hendrickson obediently fell back to Olaf's port, on the other side from their leader.

"Hendrickson,-we'll go with Olaf as far as we can. When he starts to lose altitude, here is what we'll do."

Andre was the first to land. He taxied across the field and swung the ship around in front of the camouflaged tent that was their temporary hangar. With the canopy back, he hollered at the ground crew. "Get me refueled at once! Blackhawk's up there—he may need help!"

Herron looked at the ship with a dark scowl. "What the hell you been doin' to my ship, hey? Lookit them holes, man! We got a day's work just patchin' and paint-in'!"

"Never mind that!" the French pilot yelled. "Get me gassed up!"

The other Blackhawks were coming down, with Chuck the first. His engine coughed and ran out of fuel on the approach and he came down through the thin fog in a perfect deadstick landing. The other Blackhawks came down after him; they all taxied to the hangars and yelled for fuel.

"One atta time!" Herron yelled back. "Crandall, you get them drums over there to the Pole. Tripp!"

"Yessir," the big, dark-haired mechanic answered.

"You get the Frenchy gassed up." Herron shook his head as he strode over to the Texan's ship. "You, too? You guys don't know how to treat a good piece of equipment! I send you out in perfect aircraft and lookit what you bring me back!" He made a loud and very rude sound of disgust.

"Well, y'all know how it is," the Texan smiled. "You get that new Packard, that new Ford, and you just *wait* for that first scratch." He gestured toward his oil-splattered and bullet-riddled ship. "Now it ain't no virgin nomore!"

Herron made another nasty sound. "Where are the others?" he demanded. "Don't tell me some Germans got 'em."

The Texan shook his head, his expression sobering. "Naw... they're still acorning, but slow, mighty slow. I don't think of Olaf gonna make it, pard."

"*Another* of my ships shot up?" Herron grumbled.

"Hey, pardner, they was nine a them Messerwhatsis and nine more a them Heinkleys, and alia them got guns. We wuz lucky to get back."

Herron gave him a dark look. "Only nine fighters and seven of you. Listen, cowboy, when I was in the ground crew of the Lafayette Escadrille in the big war, why three a my boys took on twice as many Germans, three *times* as many Germans many a time, before breakfast, too. Them was the real fighters."

Chuck sighed. He'd heard how great the American and Canadians had been in France before the United States entered the war in 1917. He let Herron ramble on as he staunched the flow of engine oil, and listened for the incoming trio of Blackhawks.

"Go on," Olaf urged them for the tenth time. "You cannot save me."

"Wrong," Blackhawk said confidently. At least, he thought, I *think* you're

wrong. We'll see.

"He's losing altitude," Hendrickson reported.

"It's time," Blackhawk said.

"It won't work," Olaf grumbled, his lantern jaw protruding belligerently. "You'll just get yourself killed, too."

"Quiet," Hendrickson said amiably.

"We've got to do this at exactly the same time," Blackhawk reminded them. "Olaf, you keep your plane as level as possible."

"Won't work," the Swede muttered. . "Shut up and fly," Blackhawk commanded.

Blackhawk's ship rose slowly in relationship to the stricken plane, whose engines were now chugging and spitting. "Easy," he said. On the other side, the Dutchman's airplane rose too, moving in close, ready to execute the unconventional and very dangerous maneuver.

Blackhawk's left wingtip rose to just below Olaf's right wingtip. On the other side, Hendrickson's wing came up under Olaf's port wing. "Ready?" Blackhawk asked.

"Ready." Hendrickson replied.

"Go."

The wings lifted, taking the weight of the ship between them. Olaf's engines coughed, died, caught, sputtered and died permanently. The two flanking planes almost lost it as the thrust of the center plane went. But they gunned their engines, and the joined aircraft moved slightly upward.

"We did it!" Hendrickson bellowed.

"Keep it steady," Blackhawk said, glancing at the sea below, then at his fuel gauges. "We still have a way to go."

Andre paced impatiently back and forth, then tossed down his cigarette and ground it under his bootheel. "That's enough," he said to the men fueling his ship. "I'll go with that. They are out there somewhere and—"

"Listen," Galen Tripp said, stopping the handpump and cocking his head. "An engine."

"Two," Crandall said. Ground crews were used to listening for distant engines and were better than the pilots at hearing them. In the short time they had been on the island, the crew had even memorized the sounds of the different engines. To an experienced and concerned crew, each is as distinctive as a fingerprint.

"Blackhawk," Tripp said, identifying one.

"And Hendrickson," Herron said, walking up.

No one said anything else. It meant Olaf was in the North Sea, and unless he had crashed practically' on the deck of a British rescue ship, he was dead. If not from the crash, then from the exposure in water so cold it literally could not even form ice.

Their breath sent out plumes of mist as they waited and listened. A blur

formed in the eastern expanse of fog, and then suddenly they started cheering as *three* ships loomed out of the mist.

In a coordinated maneuver the two escorting planes dipped their wings and let Olaf come down to a dead-stick landing. Moments later Hendrickson landed, then Blackhawk, whose engine ran out of fuel as he began to taxi.

Herron looked over his dark fleet of airplanes. "Y'know," he said to Andre, "if you jokers are going to get these planes shot up like this alia time, I don't think I'm gonna let you take 'em out."

Tripp cleared his throat outside Blackhawk's tent. "Yes?" the leather-clad pilot said.

"Sir? Radio message. I decoded it. Here you are, sir." "Thank you." Blackhawk took the sheet of paper and laid it down on the map of Blackhawk Island. It was from Levitz, sent by commercial code from New York, through London, and by a special courier network to a small radio on the Scottish coast. The New York financier had provided a more than adequate support system. Blackhawk nodded approval as he read the message, then he turned once again to the map. The second stage was about to begin. The next visit of the *Seahawk* would bring more materiel for the construction of Phase Two: real hangars and workshops, instead of camouflaged tents; barracks for pilots and ground crew; improvement in the dock; and a radio and signal tower to rise above the fog that so often carpeted the landing field.

Then Phase Three, if the war went on longer than anyone dared to think. Redoubts for the airplanes, as protection against any bombing by the Germans if they found the hideout. (Or, as Blackhawk had often thought, bombs from the British, who might not care for an independent fighting force on their doorstep.) Anti-aircraft guns and the crews to man them. Some kind of well-camouflaged fort. Then a zeppelin shed. Blackhawk always smiled at that ambition. Zeppelins had advantages other aircraft didn't, and if this terrible war went on long enough, they were going to need every weapon, every advantage they could muster.

Blackhawk Island, a fortress in the mouth of the tiger. But that was in the future. Right now, he thought, we are a canvas fortress in the fog, whose best defense is secrecy.

Still, the Germans must expect them to strike any place, at any time. He wanted every German to know *of* the Blackhawks, but not where they were.

Fear was one of their best weapons. The Germans used fear as a weapon, too, building up the image of the invincible German *Wehrmacht*. Blackhawk had seen the newsreels shot by the Germans and "leaked" to the West through neutral countries.

Proud tankers riding swiftly down Polish roads. Smiling troopers, well-equipped, marching through mbbled streets. Bombs showering down from Heinkels, dive-bombing Junkers destroying Warsaw. The Germans knew well the uses of propaganda, the winning of a war by conquering the minds of the

enemy before they even saw a German. Those huge Nazi rallies, staged explicitly for the motion picture cameras, showing the pomp and ceremony of the Nazis, the thunderous *Seig Heils*, the barbarous banners and machine-like troops, the brown-suited Hitler standing over all, Conquerer of Europe, Emperor of the World, the epitome of Teutonic destiny.

Yes, the Germans used everything: espionage, assassination, trickery, political treachery, armed might, fear, ruthless decisions that would bring about the deaths of millions.

Well, he thought, two can play that game. Or seven. Seven Blackhawks against the Third Reich. They were outnumbered.

The Nazis, that is.

## Chapter Four

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*25 December 1939*

The war in Finland continued, with the Mannerheim Line under heavy attack by the Soviets. The Russian-Germany Non-Aggression Pact was holding firm. The captain of the *Graf Spee* had ordered it scuttled outside the harbor of Montevideo, Uruguay, and committed suicide three days later. The German forces were preparing to invade Norway. The repaired airplanes of the Blackhawk group were making repeated attacks against the Luftwaffe, straffing a base in Germany, near Bremen, and downing five more German aircraft.

"We must take the war to the enemy," Blackhawk had told his men. "They must not be allowed to feel secure at any time, in any place."

"Deep strikes are beyond our reach," Stanislaus said, "even with the additional capacity fuel tanks Herron has installed."

"And gas weighs a lot," Hendrickson said, "which means you need a lot of gas just to carry a lot of gas."

"What we-all need," Chuck said, "is a gas station over j there somewhar."

"I'm working on that," Blackhawk said. "But meanwhile, we hit and hit hard."

"Merry Christmas to us," Stanislaus sighed.

"Anything new on where this von Tepp is stationed?" Olaf rumbled.

Blackhawk shook his head. "Not directly, but Levitz found a lead through an agent in Portugal."

"What man in Portygull know of man in Germany?" Chop-Chop asked.

"There's an espionage net over all of Europe," Blackhawk said. "Levitz knows I want von Tepp. He... greased a few hands."

"Ah," Andre said, knowingly.

"There's a Captain Kreck near that base outside Bremen we hit," Blackhawk said. "I'm going in to have a talk with him."

"Uh... all by yore lonesome?" Chuck asked.

Blackhawk nodded and the others shook their heads. "Uh-uh," Chop-Chop said.

"This is personal," their leader said. "I can't ask you—"

"Aw, c'mon, boss," Chuck laughed. "You gonna keep us from the fun? Lissen, I figure we can stir things up a mite whilst you drop in on the Captain fella. Right, guys?"

"Oui."

"Ja."

"You betchum."

Blackhawk shrugged. "Thank you," he said softly.

*Kapitan* Otto Kreck was slightly drunk. He had spent the evening with fellow veterans of Legion Condor, the German "volunteers" who had flown in Spain, for General Francisco Franco, against the Bolsheviks. He'd been a *Stabsfeldwebel* there, a warrant officer, but his skills had gotten him a commission fast enough.

He wore the black boots and brown uniform proudly, the three six-pointed silver stars on his left breast indicating his rank. He'd take it off and put it in the closet when he got home, he thought, and save it for the next reunion. Tomorrow he would get into his regular uniform of grey, and "fly" his signals desk.

Sometimes, Kreck wondered, perhaps we Germans go too far in our noble fetish for uniforms. We have a proper uniform for everyone, from postman to railroad guards, from admirals to bus drivers. There must be a great deal of energy going into fabricating all these different uniforms. Great herds of cows must die just for all the black boots, he thought with a laugh.

But it was all for a good cause. We Germans know how to organize, he thought. These things were important. Even coal miners have their uniforms; as did forestry and falconry officials, the diplomats and Gestapo. All part of a plan, all part of the future. When we rule the world we will need organization. These inferior races are incapable of that. It will be not only our duty, but our destiny, to supply the world with that organization. Our *Fiihrer* had said so. Everyone had said so, even those who were not of the Party.

Kreck sighed contentedly. We will be spread thin, we Germans. As many as we Aryans are, he thought, the world is very large. As an officer—and by the time the plan is completed he should be an *Oberstleutnant* at least—he would be given a territory. Some part of America, perhaps, or perhaps one of the South American countries. He'd rule it benevolently, of course, but there was



always the iron fist in the velvet glove of manners.

There would be women, of course. The leggy Americans, he thought with pleasure, then frowned. His friend, Martin, who had spent some years with the German American Bund in the United States, said they were a very-independent lot over there.

Then the Latins; yes, that would be nice. Smooth-skinned, dark-haired, so ripe, so young. Those that did not fall into his bed, by his right as conqueror and regent, well...

He licked his lips. The conqueror has rights. Stretched on a rack, their brown skins bared, he'd teach them obedience. They'd be begging him to be allowed to obey. He almost giggled as he put the key to his door. He had always enjoyed the fear in women's eyes. It made him feel good, made him feel powerful and ... manly.

He shut the door behind him as he reached for the lamp cord. Yes, Mexico, perhaps, or Argentina. There were reports from Germans who had been there. Sexually uninhibited, with lush bodies and erotic ideas, not like the coldness of the German women here. He was smiling as the lamp came on. He'd have a few secretaries, of course, and female assistants from the occupied lands—that would be necessary. And each one would know what he meant when he told them he needed them for dictation.

He'd dictate, of course. And they would obey.

His gaze fell on a pair of polished black boots with a crust of drying mud on the heels. His eyes flicked to the dark figure seated comfortably in his best chair. In a second he saw the hawk's head, the hard eyes, the barrel of the gun aimed at his heart. And knew that the stories were true, that the Minister had lied, that there *was* some kind of band of outlaw airmen.

He put a name to the ghostly rumors. "Blackhawk!"

The smile on Blackhawk's face was cold. "Do not move, Captain Kieck. I need only one answer... and you live."

"I... I..."

"Where is Baron von Tepp?"

"I don't know, I..." Kreck swallowed noisily. Somehow, looking into the muzzle of the gun, the soft flesh of the obedient Latin women seemed far away.

With casual movements, his eyes never leaving Kreck, Blackhawk put a hand into his pocket and removed a black cylinder and began screwing it to the muzzle of the automatic.

*A silencer!*

"I will ask you only once more, Kreck. Where is Baron von Tepp?"

The German stared at the slowly rotating cylinder as if hypnotized. "I... I'm just a signals officer ..."

"Yes, but the *right* signals officer. Across your desk go all the requisitions for supplies, the assignments, transfers ... it's the Butcher Squadron I want, Kreck."

"I cannot be a traitor..."

"You can be dead, however."

Kreck swallowed again, his face white. In all his fighting in the air he had never seen his enemy face to face. A glimpse, now and again, of a pale blur in a distant, passing, cockpit. But never this close, with a gun pointed at him, a ruthless man behind the death-dealing weapon.

"Who... who *are* you? Why do y-you w-want von Tepp?"

"It's personal, between him and me." Blackhawk finished tightening the stubby cylinder to the gun. "Now," he said, moving the unwavering muzzle of the gun forward an inch.

"He's ..." The German's voice went dry and he swallowed again. "He's at the air field near Oberhausen, in the Rhineland."

"Near the border with the Netherlands," Blackhawk mused. "Yes. That might well be the next place they strike."

The German's eyes were huge and he seemed sick. "You . . . you aren't going to kill me?"

A thin smile came to Blackhawk's lips. "As much as I would like to eliminate one more Nazi—"

"I'm no Nazi," Kreck said quickly. "I'm a soldier, an airman like yourself! See, the Legion Condor!" He slapped at his chest. "Not a Nazi, not me, no! That's political, I'm just a soldier, obeying orders."

Blackhawk looked at the officer with contempt. "That's what they all say," he murmured. "Well, you've served your purpose."

"No, you're going to kill me!" The captain went into a panic, his face contorted. He jumped at Blackhawk in the chair, his voice rising in a scream.

But Blackhawk was ready and the heavy cylinder of the silencer thudded against Kreck's temple. The panicking German fell, rolled over and was motionless. Blackhawk felt for his pulse. The officer was alive.

Blackhawk stood up and pulled a disc of heavy paper from his pocket, licked the back of it and slapped it to the mirror. Then he let himself out, quietly.

A golden disc with a hawk's head looked down on the unconscious German. Every little bit helps, Blackhawk thought.

Now comes the tricky part, he thought, as he slipped through the darkened streets of suburban Bremen. Twice he had to step into dark alleys, gun in hand, to avoid parties of returning sailors, drunk and noisy, going to their ships. Once he avoided a German police patrol on foot and another time two Naval Coastal Policemen, wearing their distinctive metal gorgets, suspended around their necks on a chain.

Then he was into the fields. His plane sat at the end of a flat field of grass, sere and brown in the winter, with patches of snow in the shadows under the trees. Coming down had been easy, he had only to deadstick it in the light of a quarter moon. Practically a cinch compared to wakiflg up everyone taking off,

the short runway, and the anti-aircraft defenses, in addition to the Luftwaffe night fighters which would be scrambled.

Blackhawk checked his plane over carefully, then walked the length of the field, tossing aside rocks and sticks. Then back in the cockpit he thumbed his radio switch to give one code word on a specific channel. "Magician."

Then he started his aircraft. The engines had grown cold on this winter's night, sitting in the field. They coughed and died. He tried again; the starboard engine whirled and coughed, almost died, then roared to life. The port engine followed soon after.

Remind me to get Herron a box of cigars, Blackhawk said to himself.

He revved the engines up, holding on the brakes as the ship trembled more and more. Then he released the brakes and roared down the dark field, lifting into the air as the line of trees came at him.

There was a splash of soundless light far off to the north, at Bremerhaven. Then another and another. As he climbed for altitude he could hear sirens sounding. „ The Blackhawks had come in at sea level through Helgoland Bay, then abruptly climbed on Blackhawk's signal, cutting their engines at the peak and gliding in to drop their bombs at Germany's greatest sea base.

Diversion. Sleight-of-hand. A magician's trick.

He flew southwest, away from Bremen, skimming over barely seen trees, and skirting the hills. He turned west near Cloppenberg and flew toward Blackhawk Island.

Now, he thought, to prepare for the battle. Von Tepp and me, alone. One on one. No Blackhawks, no Butcher Squadron. He grimaced at the name. The Germans had earned that name in the destruction of Warsaw, strafing civilians on the roads, bombing the city.

The world would be better off without a von Tepp.

Blackhawk paced impatiently up and down. Hendrickson, Andre and Olaf were down. He could hear Chuck's plane coming in. *Where was Stanislaus?*

The Texan climbed out of his aircraft and pulled off his flying helmet. He looked grimly at Blackhawk. "They got Stanislaus. Three Messerschmitts closed in on him. I had two on my tail, there... there was nothing I could do. I just ran. So did he, but I saw him ..."

The tall American sighed deeply. "I lost them in a cloud and swung back, but... I saw his plane in flames .... but his chute, I'm almost positive I saw his chute open..."

Blackhawk nodded. "Where was this?"

"I *think* ... well, let's go look at the map." The Black-hawks walked wearily into their commander's tent, where a large map of Northern Europe was taped to a board with a celluloid overlay. The Texan put a fingertip on Bremen. "Stanislaus and me, we skedaddled down this-away," he said, tracing a path southwest.

"We went north," Olaf said heavily, as if he had made a mistake.

"Down here... but we ran into this buncha night-fighters and swung east, then south, and then. .." He peered closely at the map. "Yup, un-huh, I think it was 'bout here, we swung west."

"The Rhineland," Blackhawk said softly.

"Uh-huh. They jumped us *here*. Maybe same bunch, maybe another . . . anyway ..." Chuck shrugged and signed. "Ol' pard's gone."

"They'll shoot him," Andre said quietly.

"Hey, howcum?" Chuck asked.

"Out of uniform, unrecognized hostile," Hendrickson glowered. "Same mit all of us, my friend. Outlaws." "Well, shhhhhooooot," the Texan complained.

Blackhawk sat at his map-strewn table, waiting. He heard Galen Tripp coming and turned his head. His eyes felt very tired and he realized it had been quite some time since he had slept.

"Sir?"

"Come in." Blackhawk took the radio message and nodded as he unfolded it. "Thank you."

The message was from Levitz's private network of spies, converted from his peacetime network of commercial agents. It was as Blackhawk feared. There was an unidentified civilian being held by the 13th Squadron, due for execution at dawn.

Blackhawk looked at his wristwatch. They did not have much time. "Tripp!"

"Yessir!"

"Wake 'em up! We're flying!"

"Sir!"

The North Sea was only a couple of feet beneath their planes. Occasionally salt spray flecked their windscreens. The West Frisian Islands were just ahead. Beyond them the wide marshes, then the Leeuwarden coast of the Netherlands. Then the turn southeast, into the Rhine.

Baron von Tepp inspected his reflection in the mirror. His moustache was properly trimmed, his cheeks freshly and cleanly shaved, his hair suitably short. The first light of dawn was making marks on the ceiling of his headquarters in the appropriated chateau.

"Schmidt!"

*"Jawohl, kapitan!"*

Von Tepp's orderly appeared, holding his well-tailored uniform jacket. Von Tepp tugged at his collarless shirt and turned his back on the orderly. His arm went back and Schmidt neatly trapped it in the left sleeve. Always the left, then the right. But you took off the high boots the other way around, the right then the left. Orderlies learned quickly to anticipate and to memorize the habits, quirks and preferences of their charges.

Schmidt had been with the Baron since he was sixteen, growing old in his service, taking a *feldwebel's* rank to accompany him to war. The new jackets were so much more sensible, he thought. The flight blouses had been especially designed to allow ease of movement in the cockpit. There were no "skirts" to the single-breasted blouse, no cuffs or attached belt, nothing to catch if— God forbid—the occupant had to jump. There was talk of a Luftwaffe National Emblem to be added to the right breast, but so far no orders had been issued.

The Baron settled the blue-grey jacket around his shoulders, saw no tarnish on his brass, and held out his hand for his cap. He set it squarely upon his head and inspected his reflection.

When you are going to kill a man, he thought, the least you could do was look correct.

A man . . . and a woman, he thought.

These cursed British. Even their nurses gave them trouble!

"Has she recanted?" he asked Schmidt harshly.

"*Nein, Hauptmann.*" Secretly Schmidt was proud of the nurse. Alone, captured by the sentries trying to sneak by, she had been dragged before von Tepp, her white uniform stained, torn and very revealing. It was wrong of the Baron to expect sexual favors, the orderly thought. Shoot her as a spy... well, this was war and the enemy was always tricky. Shoot her if you must, but do not expect her. . . nay, *demand*... her cooperation in illegal sexual escapades. No, that was wrong, and immoral, thought Schmidt.

The aging orderly felt shame at what his captain had done during the night. The chateau was not old, less than three hundred years, but it did have a cavernous cellar. The wine was mostly gone, and Luftwaffe supplies took up some of the space, but there was still an old iron ring fastened to the ceiling.

Hanging up the nurse by her wrists had not been an order easy to obey, Schmidt thought. Leaving them alone had been wrong. He should have stayed, but he had received a direct order.

He had stayed most of the night in the hall upstairs, waiting. The Baron had not spoken when he emerged, but his mood was sulphuric. Schmidt had undressed him and crept away. Von Tepp, his voice muffled by a pillow, spoke as Schmidt was about to close the door.

"Leave her there until morning. If she does not change her mind . . . add her to the morning's activities in the courtyard."

"Sir?"

Von Tepp sounded disgusted. "She changes her mind or dies as a spy!"

"*Ja, Kapitan,*" Schmidt said sadly.

Now it was morning. The nurse had not said a word. Schmidt had shrugged and cut her down and looked away as she straggled back into her tattered uniform. He knew her arms must be leaden weights, but she said nothing.

"Is everything ready?"

"*Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann,*" Schmidt said, his face expressionless. The boy

was like the father, he thought. Ruthless, cruel, severe—but that is the only way he knows how to be.

The courtyard was shadowy in the early morning light. The high stone wall on the east and south cast dark shadows across the cobblestones set in the traditional fan shapes.

"Uncivilized Hun," Stanislaus muttered. His hands were tied behind his back and there was a trickle of blood from a minor head wound. He limped slightly when he walked, the result of a totally unnecessary blow with a rifle butt as he was being shepherded to the Luftwaffe headquarters.

The British nurse looked at him, raising her eyebrows. Stanislaus smiled. "Brandy. *Schnapps*, even. It's chilly out here."

"Yes," she murmured, "a cup of tea would go well."

The guard nearby sneered. "Don't worry, in a little while it won't make much difference *how* cold it is!"

The other guard laughed. He turned as a line of grey-clad soldiers came in through a gate. The firing squad.

"It's very unfair," Stanislaus said. "Me, yes. I am in uniform, but not a recognized uniform. I knew this, I knew the risks, but you ... you're a civilian, a *nurse*, not even a military nurse. It's not right they should—"

"Did you expect mercy from the Boche?" she said, using the French term of contempt for the Germans. "They recognize only the rules that are convenient for them."

The Polish flyer nodded. "Well, we're not licked yet."

The nurse looked at him with a faint smile. "I know about British understatement, but you are something quite different, Mister, uh ... ?"

"Call me Stanislaus."

"I'm Edwina Edwards, of the Red Cross. But this uniform of yours ... I don't recognize it. Is it Polish?"

The flyer grinned. "Well, a part of it is. I'm a Black-hawk." He went on to quickly explain in a low voice what their mission was.

Edwina looked at him in amazement. "A private war? A *private* air force? To kill von Tepp?"

Stanislaus nodded. "That was the start of it, but after Blackhawk shoots him down, we'll go after all Nazi targets of opportunity."

"Very ambitious, I'd say, for a man facing a firing squad."

"And very calm for a woman facing a firing squad."

"Oh, that's just the outside," she said. "Inside, I'm jelly; outside, I'm ice. British, you know," she smiled. She looked at the growing light, creeping down the facade of the chateau as the sun rose. "Well, if your friends have a rescue attempt in mind, as you suggest, then they had best hurry." She inclined her head toward the doorway leading into the courtyard, at the dapper figure of von Tepp descending the steps.

"Well," the German officer said with a sneer. "This is one Blackhawk that

shall not fly again. Today we clip your wings ... permanently."

"There will be more like me," the Pole said calmly. "You Huns will not win."

"Ah, the rhetoric of the trapped rat," von Tepp sneered. "And you, my dear *Fraulein* Edwards, you still prefer the dampness of the grave to my other alternative?"

She just looked him in the eye, an expression of pity on her face until von Tepp grew enraged. "Well!" he snapped, turning away. "It is too bad one so pretty must die, but that is\* entirely your choice."

He looked at the sergeant in charge of the firing squad. "Bolter!"

"*Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann!*"

"Prepare to execute these prisoners!"

"*Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann! Heil Hitler!*"

"Heil," von Tepp said casually.

The *Hauptfeldwebel* turned briskly about and opened his mouth to give the orders that would place Stanislaus and the British nurse against the selected and approved section of stone wall, where other pockmarks already marred the surface.

"Ach!" a soldier guarding the prisoners said, his head snapping up at a sound.

It was a song, but not a song they had heard before. It was in English, but they knew one word of it and that word struck fear into them.

"Over land, over sea,

We fight to make men free!

Of danger we don't care ...

We're *Blackhawks!*"

Von Tepp's eyes narrowed and his hand went for his holstered Walther P38 as the heavy wooden door to the grounds beyond swung open. But something made him stop, his fingers just touching the leather.

A figure strode through the gateway, a figure in black leather, a confident figure, armed, but with the gun still in its holster. Not even the *Hauptfeldwebel* moved or spoke. Something was wildly wrong.

"Did someone mention my name?" Blackhawk said casually. "Hello, Stanislaus, are you well? Miss," he said politely to the nurse. Then he turned toward von Tepp. "*Hauptmann* von Tepp, you are my prisoner. Please hand over your weapon."

The Baron was astonished. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. A von Tepp did not surrender, a von Tepp *took* surrenders! His hand clawed at his holster flap.

The black-clad figure did not even move as the Walther cleared leather.

*Whannng!*

The shot that had ripped the handgun from the German's hand came from the wall, and von Tepp stared upward, his wrenched hand stinging. Around the wall, like black birds of prey, stood five men in black leather uniforms, hawk

symbols on their chests. Each cradled an American weapon, a Thompson submachine gun, each with the standard 30-round drum of .45 caliber cartridges.

## Chapter Five

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Von Tepp stared incredulously at the one leather-clad figure who had fired, using his Thompson on single-fire. The madman could have cut me in two, the German thought.

The Nazi looked around, saw his firing squad and non-coms standing frozen, caught by surprise and under the guns.

"You see, my dear von Tepp," the man before him said. "Resistance is quite useless."

"Who the devil are you?" the Prussian demanded.

"Call me ... Blackhawk."

Von Tepp's lips compressed in a thin line. "So you are an illegal trespasser upon German soil!"

Blackhawk smiled back, but it was a cold smile. "And you are a trespasser upon the world."

There was a sudden movement in the firing squad. Bolter, the sergeant in charge, whipped up his MP 38 submachine gun—the one so often erroneously called the Schmeisser—and fired a burst of bullets at the figures on the wall.

But his slugs went wild as Hendrickson fired at the first movement, blasting the non-com to the ground. There was a scream and the firing squad lifted their rifles.

Blam! Blam!

*Plud! Plud! Plud!*

Bullets laced the air of the courtyard and von Tepp, making a run for the gate, shouldered Blackhawk aside. The guards next to Stanislaus and the nurse threw up their Mausers to cut down Blackhawk, but he grabbed one by the barrel, yanking the rifleman forward, kneeling him in the crotch, as he spun him around to send him crashing into the other.

Nurse Edwards stuck out her foot and von Tepp stumbled over her in his mad dash for the gate. He sprawled on the cobblestones, bruised and shaken. "Why, *Hauptmann!* Such bad manners," she said sweetly. "Leaving without saying goodbye?"

Blackhawk looked around. Von Tepp was the only survivor. "Let's move!" he ordered, for the other Germans in the chateau, and those bivouacked in the nearby buildings, would soon be after them.



Blackhawk yanked von Tepp to his feet. "You're coming with me, kraut! I have plans for you!"

Under the guns of the Blackhawks, von Tepp was hustled out through the gate and toward the meadow where the Grumman Blackhawks rested. Anticipating the return with Stanislaus and von Tepp, Blackhawk had left his own ship at home and had used a light civilian plane capable of carrying four passengers.

They quickly tied and blindfolded the outraged Prussian and climbed aboard. With Stanislaus guarding von Tepp, and Edwina next to Blackhawk, the ships rumbled down the meadow one by one and took to the air.

They flew at tree-top height through the farmlands, and successfully evaded all of the German patrol planes. But not the British.

A flight of four Hurricanes picked them up over the Channel, a flock of black birds with a dove in the center. Blackhawk did not answer their radio queries and the Hurricanes followed.

"Uh-oh," Chuck said over the radio. "They're waiting for help."

"We can't fight them," Blackhawk stated. "And stay off the radio."

They had one chance—the thick cloud bank to the north. Blackhawk turned in that direction and put the heavily-laden light aircraft to the test.

"Bandits at seven o'clock," Chuck said from his tail position.

Four more Hurricanes were rising to meet them.

"I want to go home," Edwina Edwards said.

"You shall be returned," Blackhawk said, estimating the time and distance to the clouds. They could lose them there, turning abruptly westward, toward Blackhawk Island.

"Where are we going? Why are we running from British ships?"

"You forgot," Stanislaus said. "They don't know who we are any more than the Germans, and are just as likely to shoot us down. We're unidentified aircraft on their front porch, as it were."

"Aircraft we cannot fight," Blackhawk murmured.

"When we get to this island of yours," the nurse said, "what then?"

"I have some unfinished business with the Baron there. I'm going to give him his last break."

The Hurricanes grew closer... but so did the clouds.

It was a close call, with the flight of Blackhawk planes disappearing into the thick clouds only a minute ahead of the Hurricanes. One flight lifted above the clouds to watch, while the other dropped down into the light rain below to see if they emerged there.

But, streaked with rainwater, the Blackhawks emerged from the clouds miles to the west, and saw the familiar low fog around Blackhawk Island.

\* \* \*

Von Tepp blinked as the blindfold was removed, and he rubbed at his chaffed wrists as he took in what he saw around him. It had the look of a forward

base, with temporary shelters and crude defenses. But there was a bulldozer, pallets of cement, timbers, reinforcing steel, crates of spare parts. The Baron had no idea where he was, but once he escaped, he could find out and report back to German High Command. This odd little island might make a fine secret advance base for the invasion of Great Britain.

He looked with contempt at the Blackhawk figures tending to their Grummans. "A rather low-budget operation, Herr Blackhawk," he sneered.

"That needn't worry you, *mein herr*," Blackhawk said. He pointed at two ships, both Grumman Skyrockets. "Take your choice."

"My choice?"

"It's you and me, *kraut*. Pick one and we go up. Only one of us shall live."

Von Tepp arched an eyebrow. "You, against *me*? You do not look like the suicidal type, my friend."

Blackhawk shrugged, and gestured toward the ships. "Help yourself."

The German flyer narrowed his eyes. "I do not wish to offend my ... my host, but, you understand, I should like to examine both these machines, Herr Blackhawk."

Blackhawk indicated with a tilt of his head for the Nazi to go ahead. Von Tepp looked over each of the engines, then climbed into each cockpit for a long inspection. He climbed down and pointed at the other plane. "That one. But first; you must tell me the reasoning behind this ... unusual challenge."

"In other words, what is it all about?" Blackhawk said with a humorless smile. "Do you remember the first day of the invasion of Poland?" Von Tepp's eyes narrowed and he nodded. "There was one flyer you engaged. He had an old plane and—"

"*I*la, I remember. A good pilot but outclassed."

"Do you also remember trying to bomb him as he fled the wreckage?"

"Yes, so? This is war, my friend."

"Do you remember where your bomb landed?"

Von Tepp frowned. There had been so much since then. Bullets expended, bombs dropped, long rows of refugees diving into ditches, the joyous feeling of seeing an opponent's plane catch fire, or explode. He shrugged. "He died, I lived."

"The bomb hit a small farmhouse and killed the two people inside," Blackhawk said grimly.

Von Tepp arched an eyebrow and adjusted his monocle. "There are always civilian casualties in a war. It has always been thus and always shall."

"Well, those two people were my brother and my sister."

Von Tepp's expression changed as he realized Blackhawk's motive: revenge. But he kept his own temper. Those controlled by raw emotions, he knew, sometimes were extraordinarily strong, but their decisions under pressure were often erratic, even illogical. He thought he knew now what this Blackhawk creature had in mind.

A joust. A tourney. The fool was full of romantic notions of retribution. Li

his place, von Tepp would have simply shot down his adversary in the courtyard of the chateau and gone about his business. No, he checked himself. Given the time, he might have taken his enemy to the chateau's cellars and made him last a long time. And made the nurse watch. Perhaps seeing another human being die screaming would have made her more pliable. He should have thought of that and utilized the Pole, the captive Blackhawk.

But none of these thoughts showed on the arrogant face of the Nazi pilot. "You realize you are providing me with a means of escape," von Tepp sneered. "Once you are in flames, I shall fly home." And tell them of this secret base, he thought.

Blackhawk smiled again. "I am not worried, von Tepp. This time I'm not flying an obsolete aircraft. The planes are identical, so it will be pilot against pilot. Shall we?" he asked, gesturing toward the planes.

The German bowed and clicked his heels. "May you prove a worthy opponent." Blackhawk turned to give orders to the rest of his men, while the German ducked under the plane he had rejected.

"Olaf, when this is over, take Miss Edwards into Scotland in the cabin plane. And blindfold her." He looked at the English nurse and said, "Miss, I hope you understand. We must keep our secret here."

She licked at her lips. "Uh ... it seems to me you have chosen a rather dangerous life here, Blackhawk. Perhaps you could use a nurse who is all too familiar with wounds?"

Blackhawk nodded. "Yes, but there are people who love you, who need you. You have your duty elsewhere."

"They all think I'm dead, anyway . . ."

Blackhawk shook his head. "No, that would be cruel. And besides, you would be a . . . source of distraction here."

"Oh?" she smiled, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, I'd have men reporting on sick call just to get you to hold their hand. No, I'm sorry. And I'd appreciate it if you kept quiet about what you know of us."

"Of course," she said, feeling sad and rejected.

"Hendrickson!"

"Sir?"

"If anything happens . . . you're in command."

"Sir."

"Nothing will happen, *mon ami*," Andre said, slapping Blackhawk's shoulder. "This *Boche*, he has not flown against *Blackhawk*."

No, Blackhawk thought, not against *Blackhawk*, but in my other life, yes, and that earlier version of me lost.

"Wind 'em up!" he said.

The two Grumman Skyrockets rose almost together and it was von Tepp who sought to strike the first blow. His machine guns hammered into the space

occupied by Blackhawk only a second before, and the battle was on.

The fog was shredded as the planes soared in low, rose into the air, thundered across the sky, one chasing the other and 'switching positions with dangerously tight maneuvers.

*Plud! Plud! Plud! Plud!*

A series of raggedy holes exploded along Blackhawk's fuselage. He banked over, went into an Immelmann turn and ended up on the tail of the Nazi.

"Hellava thing to do to a good Grumman," he muttered as his eight machine guns chattered away. But only a few slugs came close to the tricky German's right engine. The Nazi shoved his ship into a steep dive, heading down toward Blackhawk Island.

Blackhawk went in pursuit, then saw with horror that von Tepp was machine-gunning the grounded Blackhawks and the support team. He saw them run for the slit trenches. The German pulled up and Blackhawk pulled up with him.

*Spannnng!*

He felt something give in the ship, a sharp metallic sound. Seconds later, as he climbed steeply toward von Tepp his port engine sputtered and died, caught again, then sputtered more and died permanently.

At first Blackhawk thought there had been bullet damage, but von Tepp had not hit that side at all. Then he realized what the treacherous Nazi had done to "even the odds." In his examination of the ship, or when Black-hawk had been giving instructions, von Tepp had damaged the fuel petcock.

Blackhawk only had one engine.

He saw von Tepp banking around, coming back at him. He saw the flickering flames in the leading edges of the black wings, the machine guns firing right at him.

Blackhawk dropped the nose and twisted away, but now he had neither the speed nor the power to outfight von Tepp. It was like having one hand tied behind him.

He'll get away, Blackhawk thought furiously. He'll get the jump on the 'Hawks, get through and alert the Germans to the Island. One swift bomber strike and we are out of business. Or he might even get trickier still and inform the British we're a *German* secret base and let them smash us.

He must not get away. He must *pay*, Blackhawk thought.

He dodged von Tepp's first attack, then tried to gain altitude, but the other ship was twice as powerful and outclimbed him:

*He must not get away!*

Von Tepp started his final dive-and Blackhawk knew it.' This was it. One of his own planes would gun him down. Von Tepp would live, the Blackhawks would die.

There was only one thing to be done, only one weapon he had: the unexpected.

Instead of running, Blackhawk turned right into von Tepp's path, a collision

course lined with fifty-caliber slugs going in both directions.

And then Blackhawk deliberately crashed his plane into von Tepp's.

Like great wounded birds they fluttered down, angrily meshed together, spinning crazily earthward. They broke apart just before crashing into the tiny flat-topped island, but neither achieved a landing with their crippled planes, only eased slightly the whopping double-crash into the rocky Scottish soil.

Silence.

Thin wisps of smoke rose from both planes.

Then the shattered canopy of one creaked back and a bloody figure in a tattered uniform got slowly from the cockpit and staggered toward the other wreck.

The pilot looked at the smashed wreckage and felt triumph. He, Karl Friedrich von Tepp, had rid the Third Reich of one more pitiful challenge. *He* was the better pilot!

"I always win," he whispered through puffed lips.

There was the sound of rending metal and a voice from the wreckage said huskily, "Not always, *kraut*."

"Gott in himmel!"

Blackhawk crawled from the remains of the Grumman fighter, his right arm hanging limp and his leather uniform ripped. While he was still on his knees, Blackhawk saw the rage contort von Tepp's features.

The German grasped a bent strut of the crashed aircraft and sought to wrench it free. Blackhawk staggered to his feet, holding on to the side of the upside-down Grumman. His vision was blurred, his head ached and there was no feeling in his arm.

With a roar von Tepp pulled free the metal strut. He raised it high and charged straight at his enemy, a savage attack with a primitive weapon.

Blackhawk dodged the first overhand blow, but stumbled and fell, the pain in his arm bringing a cry to his lips.- Von Tepp struck again, but Blackhawk rolled aside. He lashed out with his boots, catching the shouting German in the gut.

Von Tepp staggered back, waving the strut, hit the side of the Grumman and screamed.

His face contorted in pain, then went slack.

Von Tepp slumped, all life going from his body, but he did not fall.

Blackhawk got painfully to his feet, aware of the shouts of the other Blackhawks running across the rocky island. He limped painfully over to von Tepp and saw what had happened. He turned away, all emotion draining from him, and an immense weariness descended.

Stanislaus and Olaf caught him as he fell. Edwina Edwards hesitated, then went over to look at von Tepp. She saw what Blackhawk had seen. In wrenching loose the strut to use as a weapon he had bent out a piece of metal. He had fallen back against it when Blackhawk kicked him and the sharp end had penetrated his heart.

Blackhawk had found his revenge.

Edwina Edwards checked the bandages on Blackhawk and smiled. "You'll live."

"Will I be able to play the piano again?" he asked with a smile.

"I don't see why not," she said seriously. "There was no damage to the tendons or... what are you smiling about?"

"Modern medicine is wonderful."

She raised her eyebrows, then caught it. "You couldn't play the piano."

Blackhawk smiled and nodded. "Thank you for staying, You may be right, we do need some kind of medical aid here."

"But not me."

He shook his head. "Maybe some day. You're too... distracting. We should have some bossy nurse with legs like posts and a face like a bowl of mush. Then we'd want to get well as soon as possible."

"Get well to do what?" she asked

"Continue the fight."

"You had your revenge," she said.

"Against von Tepp, yes. But not against the Nazi. They must be stopped. It's really very simple. Every person in the world who desires freedom must help stop this madness."

She nodded. Blackhawk had lost none of his drive toward the ultimate end. There was no place for her here. She patted his good arm. "You'll be flying in a few weeks ..."

"No, not weeks. A week, ten days. The Germans are going to invade France. That will put them within striking distance of England. They are inventive bastards," he said. "They'll come up with things no one has ever thought about before. They tested out their planes in Spain. We've heard talk of aircraft that fly without propellers, and of rockets. Secret stuff.. . and that's our kind of mission, Edwina."

"You plan to win the war by yourself?"

He shook his head. "No, just my little part of it. The big things, the invasions, the long range bombing, that will be done by the regular forces. But we'll be a terrier, yanking at their trousers, something they cannot ignore. The Hun will use up a lot of time, energy and planes trying to get us."

"Will they get you?" she asked.

He smiled. "We got 'em outnumbered."

She leaned over to kiss him on the lips. "I'm not a doctor, but I'll make house calls if you need me."

"I hope we won't," Blackhawk shrugged, "but. . ."

She turned to go. There was a plane waiting, fog swirling around the landing gear. She took one last look, then strode right to the aircraft.

Blackhawk watched the ship head into the sunset, watched it until it dwindled and disappeared in the pink clouds. Then he turned and limped

toward his tent.

Tomorrow they were going to have to get to work. Replace the lost planes, build camouflaged shelters, replenish their supplies, tap Levitz's private espionage network and find out the next chink in the armor.

There was a lot of work to do.

All of it deadly.

## Chapter Six

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*12 May 1940*

Germany had conquered Norway and their submarines roamed the North Atlantic in wolfpacks. Finland had surrendered to the Russians. Hitler and Mussolini met at the Brenner Pass and the Italian dictator said he was ready to join Germany in the war against France and Britain. Denmark was invaded and Copenhagen taken within twelve hours. The British fleet suffered heavy losses. King Hakkon of Norway evacuated with the gold reserves of his country, into exile in Britain. Winston Churchill, who had been working his way up through high British offices, became Prime Minister. The Blackhawks replaced their lost Grummans with a new shipment coming in on the *Seabird*, along with a terse note from Levitz, which said, "Planes do not grow on trees!" The German war machine began their invasion of France.

The Blackhawks had been on limited service during the late winter and early spring. One of the problems was the increased patrols of the Royal Air Force. They never minded meeting a German, but they refused to enter into combat with the RAF. Andre came home from patrol with a slight leg wound and 47 holes from a Hawker Hurricane's four .303-inch Browning machine guns.

Chuck, separated from his compatriots during a brief skirmish with a flight of the new Messerschmitt 110s over Lower Saxony in the northeast corner of Germany, had severe tail damage and barely made it to home base.

Stanislaus, in the same battle, had a portion of his wing flap controls shot away, and received severe damage to his electrical system. He all but crash-landed at an RAF field near North Berwick, not far from Edinburgh. He stuffed Ms Blackhawk jacket behind the seat and sweet-talked them into believing he was a member of the new nightfighter unit of the Free Poland Air Force. They gave him necessary repairs, refueled him and as he was taxiing toward the runway, a flight lieutenant came running from the radio shack with a message: there was not yet a Free Poland Air Force, much less a nightfighter

unit.

Stanislaus took off ahead of the scramble, lost the pursuers over Dundee, then flew southwest almost to Ireland before turning north, going up the west coast of Scotland, then across that beautiful country to the bleak island he called home base.

Meanwhile, the total of destroyed German fighters grew.

Blackhawk got back into action soon after, but their missions were still quite limited. During his convalescence Blackhawk had donned civilian clothes and traveled to London incognito. There he contacted Lloyd Christopher, Levitz's British agent.

It was from Christopher that they first heard the rumors of German superweapons, and when Blackhawk could again fly he donned his leathers and sought out some of these sites.

The Blackhawks penetrated occupied Norway to blow up a plant making something called "heavy water," used in some sort of super-secret research. They had no idea what it did, but Christopher had told them it was important to stop its production.

In January, Hendrickson, Chuck and Andre had spotted a small German plane, the sort often used to transport high-ranking officers. They went after it, but the pilot preferred to crash-land rather than be shot down. It was a long time before they discovered that the plane they had forced down at Mechelen, Belgium, contained **two** German officers with the plans for the invasion of France. They were unable to destroy the documents before capture. The invasion, planned for January 17, was postponed.

All the Blackhawks fretted over their limited ability to operate without interference from the British. Blackhawk, through Lloyd Christopher, asked Levitz to get the Brits to turn a blind eye to their operations, but there were no quick answers.

#### *19 May 1940*

The German Panzer forces paused briefly in their rush across France to regroup between Peronne and St. Quentin. General Erwin Rommel's 7th Panzer Division made a small advance in the direction of Arras. General Charles de Gaulle's 4th Armored Division was on the attack. The possibility that the British Expeditionary Force might have to evacuate was raised for the first time in discussions between London and the commanders in the field. The Blackhawks flew at wavetop level to a secret field near St. Po, near Calais, France, where Levitz had arranged for a tank-truck of high-test gasoline to be waiting. They prepared to fly against Rommel to the northeast.

"But not against the tanks," Blackhawk said. "Against their fuel supply." He pointed at a map. "The Germans have only two sources for their gasoline... or petrol, as you call it here. . . one is their own tanker trucks, coming up after them."



"And the other is captured supplies," Chuck nodded. "I getcha, boss. We knock out the supply dumps."

"Not quite. Close, but not *quite* it," Blackhawk said.

"Frenchies need gazzoline," Chop-Chop said, grinning. "So we can only hit after Frenchies go and befo' Nazzis come."

"Exactly, Chop-Chop," Blackhawk said. He pulled a radio message from his tunic. "This is from Mister Levitz's private intelligence network. It seems the Germans are testing a new tank in this push. Its code name is *Krieglowe*."

"Warlion?" Stanislaus asked.

"It's big and fast and ... unusual, apparently, though the network didn't have details. If it works out in battle, they'll really start manufacturing them," Blackhawk said. "But if we can show it's vulnerable, or faulty, or not up to their standards ..." He grinned at the Blackhawks and spread his hands.

Then Blackhawk sobered. "This is going to be a long, bloody war. Anything we can do ... *anything* ... to slow down the Germans, to cause confusion ... to make them suspicious of each other... to make them uncertain of their own actions, their own decisions... every single thing like that will help."

"*Mai oui*," Andre said, stretching. "When do we fly?"

Just before a dawn takeoff Blackhawk received a coded message from their island base: Levitz had managed to get a 48-hour "hands off" notice to the Royal Air Force and the French Air Force regarding the black Grummans operating in the Calais region. Unofficially, it was leaked that they were American planes, with American pilots who were evaluating them for combat; perhaps later to be sold—or leased!—to the RAF.

"We have 48 hours," Blackhawk said, then looked at his watch. "A little over 46 now... to find and destroy this Warlion."

"Is there more than one?" Olaf asked, Blackhawk shrugged an answer.

They climbed into their planes and started up the twin engines. The black aircraft rose into the dawn sky like startled ravens.

Far below Rommel's tanks made double tracks across the fields and down the dusty roads, racing toward Arras and encountering almost no resistance. A half-dozen civilians had made a Molotov cocktail attack from a wood and had been driven back with the temporary stoppage of one tank.

The Blackhawks dove in from the sun, their machine gun slugs pinging off the tanks. Olaf cursed heavily. "It may make the ears ring, but buttoned up like that we can't get to them."

Blackhawk thought a moment as they climbed back into the sky. "Andre, see that field back there, about a mile behind where the tank stopped?"

"*Oui*.. ."

"You and I will land there. The rest of you will fly cover, but don't be too obvious about it. We're going tank hunting on foot."

There was a gleeful chuckle from Chop-Chop, for he anticipated a use of his own particular skills.

The field was a flat, grassy meadow with two surprised cows in one corner. They taxied the Grummans into some cover under trees at the field's edge. Blackhawk had explained his rough plan on the way down and the other four Blackhawks had gone off to the east to harass and— they hoped—stop the next line of tanks. It would not do to have German Tigers coming up just as they were "acquiring" the wounded tank.

Chop-Chop limbered up as they trotted along the low rock wall that edged the field. They moved ahead quickly and silently. From time to time they stopped to listen. Soon they could hear the clink of metal and the guttural curses of some tanker.

They dropped into a ditch and ran along, bent over, until they found a convenient patch of brush from which to observe.

The Tiger had received the gasoline bomb against the right side and some of the personal gear and jerrycans of gas strapped there had burned, scorching the tank badly. The crew was finishing extinguishing the fire and cleaning away the debris.

Tankers wore black jackets and loose black trousers. It was the first uniform ever designed especially for tanks and the color had been selected not to show grease stains. There were no flaps or cuffs to catch on anything, and all three wore soft black berets.

Blackhawk motioned to Chop-Chop to move along the ditch. There was no way they could approach the tank over the exposed roadway without being seen. Blackhawk took the hawk symbol from his hat and gestured for Andre to do the same. He whispered his orders and then they watched for their chance.

Both men sprinted out into the center of the road, then started sauntering casually along, chattering in German about whose fault it was that their Tiger had engine trouble.

The tank crew blinked at them. The strangers were in black, like themselves, but their uniforms were quite different. The tank corporal looked at the sergeant. The strangers did not appear hostile, but the sergeant put his hand on his sidearm anyway.

Blackhawk and Andre seemed to see the tank at the same time and smiles broke across their faces. They called out happily to their "comrades," and started toward them. Andre joked about how only his unerring ability to find help had saved them and Blackhawk burst into a tirade against Andre's Teutonic ancestors who had been so lax as to couple with donkeys and produce such an idiot.

Hands waving and voices raised they avoided any questions from the sergeant until they were within reach. Then Chop-Chop came up out of the ditch.

Blackhawk punched the sergeant and Andre kicked the corporal in the shins before landing a hard right into his solar plexus. Chop-Chop seemed to run right up the tank and leap in the air, his foot smashing into the startled tanker getting into the hatch. The tanker fell off the tank with a rattle and a groan and Blackhawk finished off the sergeant.

Grabbing a handhold, Blackhawk jumped onto the tank and went feet first down into the turret, banging his knees and elbows painfully. The solitary German tanker was no match for Blackhawk's hard right fist.

Within five minutes the Germans had been dragged into the trees, tied and gagged, and Chop-Chop was trying to learn how to steer the steel fortress.

They started up and lurched along the road. Blackhawk and Andre had removed their Blackhawk leather jackets and replaced them with the tanker jackets. Blackhawk stood in the open hatch and hoped there would not be more French partisan attacks.

It took Chop-Chop five miles before he could stay on the road. They tried him out ,through a field, but he ran the tank right through the empty stone house of a French farmer. But once he got the hang of it, he didn't hit too many things.

Blackhawk monitored the German combat radio through several bands, but caught no mention of any War-lion. Then they came up on the rear echelons of the force the tank they had captured had come from. Immediately Blackhawk knew he had made a mistake—he was obviously not the big blonde recruiting poster type of non-com who had originally been the tank commander.

He ducked down and directed the tank to jerk and halt, proceed and swivel, and to finally pull off the road. The radio crackled with the voice of the major in charge. "Lauterbach, is it the same trouble?"

*"Jawohl, major."*

"Well, get it fixed and catch up. We must rendezvous with the Warlion force by noon."

*"Jawohl, major,"* Blackhawk said. A grin split his dark face. "Aha," he said softly to Andre and Chop-Chop. They climbed out and made imaginary repairs until the tanks had advanced far enough so none of the tankers could tell *who* was in the turret. Then they crawled along after them. They had a rendezvous with some kind of super-weapon.

The sun was high and Blackhawk saw the tanks ahead turn off toward some low hills. He halted his tank, then pulled off into the trees and hid the metal beast in a clearing. "We can't sneak up on them in anything this loud."

*"Moving foxyhole, though,"* Chop-Chop said.

They left Chop-Chop with the tank and Blackhawk and Andre ran through the woods toward what they hoped was the rendezvous. They followed the stench of diesel fumes and the clink, clatter and thump of the tanks, then crawled the last few yards.

This was an area of wide-spaced trees, with enough room to maneuver around the trunks for the tanks. The Germans climbed out and sat on the tops, eating chocolate and smoking. One of the black-clad tankers came straight for the hidden Blackhawks, but stopped short to relieve himself against a tree.

Then they heard the noise.

A tank force was coming. Rattle-rattle-growl. They heard the sharp sound, almost like a rifle shot, then the crashing of a tree, swishing down through the nearby trees. Then another tree toppled and Blackhawk could see movement in the treetops to the north.

A tank force was simply knocking down the trees before it. Then Blackhawk blinked. It wasn't a tank force, it was one tank. Then another appeared, behind it, and one beyond that. Three giant bull elephants of steel.

The tanks were many times larger than the Tigers and almost twice as high. Machine gun turrets were at each corner. The main cannon turret was very large and Blackhawk recognized the immense Kanone 18. It had a 96-pound shell with a maximum range of 27,000 yards. It was at least several times bigger than any cannon ever put on a tank. In fact, Blackhawk had never imagined a gun that big could be put on *any* tank. It made the Warlion a kind of land-cruising battleship.

The three tanks lumbered to a halt and for a moment sat there, dust settling, the engines dying, as if permitting themselves to be admired. And they were, for it was the German tankers' first sight of the secret weapon, too. They hopped off their vehicles and ran over as the tank commander lifted the hatch and climbed out.

At once the men stopped, nervous and staring. The man was huge, with a bullet head, shaved smooth, and a scar across his forehead like an immense frown. He was heavily muscled and snarled at the tankers in a harsh voice to stay away from his tanks.

He wore the black beret and black trousers of the tankers, but instead of the dark jacket he wore a crimson tunic of similar cut, and the insignie of a lieutenant colonel.

The major in charge of the Tiger force stepped forward and saluted. The German army officers did not automatically shout their *Seig Heils*, as that was more a political matter and not all Germans were members of the National Socialist German Workers Party—the NSDAP\*—or Nazi Party.

But the crimson-jacketed colonel certainly was. He arrogantly *Seig Heiled* the major and waited until the awestruck officer *Heiled* him back.

*"Oberstleutnant Falkenstein!"* he said.

*"Major Gorlitz!"*

*"Gorlitz, you understand our objectives?"*

*"Jawohl, Oberstleutnant! To give aid and assistance to the Warlion unit during field evaluation tests!"*

*"Good."* Falkenstein looked the Tiger tanks over disdainfully, as if they were used cars he was stuck with, and the men in them schoolchildren. He

spoke to someone in his tank, then climbed out.

He jumped down and waited. In a moment a sergeant climbed out bearing a wicker basket. He unstrapped a folding table from the gear on the huge tank's side and set it up in the shade. He set two folding chairs by it and spread out a lunch, including chicken, wine and cheese.

Andre could see the label on the bottle, nodded approval of the selection, then frowned as he realized where the German had gotten the French wine.

Blackhawk signaled him and they slithered away and returned to their tank.

"If we can get inside one of those monsters ..." Black-hawk said thoughtfully.

"Tonight?" Andre suggested.

"Yes, but they might cause a lot of destruction between now and then. Not to mention getting to the petrol supply here," he said, putting a finger on the map.

Andre looked at the map. "The French will blow it up, no?" Blackhawk shrugged.

"Probably. They should. But you know the army... *any* army . . ., they might not get orders to."

"But the Germans *are* going there, correct?" Andre asked.

"Yes, I imagine so."

"We go first," Chop-Chop suggested. "Wait for tankee, pretend to re-fool. . ."

"And jump it!" Blackhawk said. Then he looked thoughtful. "There's only three of us and there's three tank crews of them. Not to mention the Tigers."

Andre grinned. "Well, we have certain advantages." He held up a finger. "Surprise is one." He held up another finger. "We're Blackhawks!" A third finger went up. "Surprise."

"That's two surprises," Blackhawk said.

"Three," Andre said, pointing at all of them.

"Oh, in that case ..." Blackhawk laughed.

They stopped their tank back in the woods from the French petrol supply dump. It was in a 17th-century chateau that had seen better days. The drums were concealed in the roofless stone barn and the nervous garrison of twelve quartermasters and a six-man group of infantry were headquartered in the few rooms still habitable in the chateau, which had been ruined during the fighting in-1916 and never rebuilt.

Andre took off his German tanker jacket, put on his Blackhawk leathers and went down to talk to them. He returned an hour and a half later. "We French, we have to talk everything over ... and over ... and *over*." He shrugged. "They have agreed to our plan." He smiled slightly. "They were looking for some excuse to go hide in the woods, I imagine. They had no orders to destroy the dump but they also did not want to fight any Tiger force, either."

"Understandable," Blackhawk murmured. "Neither do I."

"What about them?" Andre said, aiming his thumb at the sky.

Blackhawk glanced at his watch. "Refueling, I hope. Okay, Chop-Chop, take her in."

They positioned the slightly ruined Tiger at the entrance, gun out as if guarding the dump. Blackhawk and Andre were back in their tanker jackets and Blackhawk was on top of a wall with field glasses. "Here they come," he called down.

The Warlions came first, just as Blackhawk had hoped. The Tigers were just support and unimportant to Falkenstein. Pawns, but pawns had their uses.

Andre stepped out into sight and waved them on, grinning. The radio crackled and Andre ran back to climb in and answer it. The tanks were approaching gingerly.

"Sir!" Andre said in his best German.

"Identify yourself!" Faulkenstein snarled.

Andre lifted the identity papers they had taken from the tanker sergeant and read off his name and rank, hoping he had selected the right regional accent and that the crackle of the radio would disguise his voice from the major. "We took a shorter route, sir," he said. "The French offered no resistance. They *ran!*"

"You are prepared to refuel us?"

"*Jawohl, Oberstleutnant!*"

"Very well, we are coming in."

Andre got out of the tank, winking at Chop-Chop sitting at the controls. Blackhawk jumped off the wall and went to the prepared drums of diesel oil.

The Warlion rumbled closer. It edged in past the wounded Tiger and stopped. As Andre jumped on the tank the hatch opened and he struck the first man coming out in the face. Then he took the "potato masher" German grenade from his belt, pounded the handle end down to prime it, dropped it through the hatch and slammed it closed.

The explosion bumped Andre, sitting on the hatch. Then he saw the crimson tunic on the tank commander of the *second* tank, crawling up the slight hill toward them.

Andre and Blackhawk exchanged looks. The suspicious Falkenstein had sent in a subordinate! Andre opened the hatch and jumped in. The only German left alive tried to aim a Luger at him, but Andre knocked it from his hand and the young officer fell away, eyes staring.

There was blood everywhere.

Andre heard Blackhawk tumble in after him as he climbed into the driver's seat. Blackhawk wiggled back to the aiming mechanism of the big Kanone 18 and began desperately to figure out how it worked.

They knew they had only seconds. Falkenstein would hesitate to shoot into the petrol dump, but he'd hesitate only so long. Blackhawk swung the turret around. There was already a shell in the chamber. The hatch opened and Chop-Chop climbed in and back to the armory, getting another 96-pound shell

ready.

Blackhawk's first round was wildly off, but it made the Tiger tanks beyond scatter. Over the combat radio they could hear Falkenstein bellow his battle orders and Blackhawk smiled. They would be going to the left, to get protection from the stone barn.

He swung the turret and Chop-Chop slapped his shoulder. The second round was just as fantastically deafening as the first and Blackhawk's ears rang. Chop-Chop handed him some earplugs as Andre lurched the tank into motion.

Blackhawk did not like what was happening. In the air he would have known what to do. But this was a two-dimensional world, a flat world, no ups or downs: and in a metal box he didn't really know how to use and the enemy did.

The massive Warlion charged out, knocking down a portion of the rock wall, grinding the stones to dust under the immense treads. There were explosions to the left and right as the two opposing tanks fired.

Then Andre did something quite natural... for a flyer. He turned straight at the Warlions, something he had often done in the air. But tanks don't fight like that very often. Tanks move around, stand off, or hide and fire from good cover. They don't charge head on, guns firing.

Blackhawk fired again and the tank on the right exploded, sending off the huge turret like it was a bottle cap. He swung the turret toward Falkenstein's tank, but the crafty commander had gone around the chateau. There was a loud clanging and the Blackhawks were hurtled against the bulkhead. The Tigers were getting into the act.

Andre swerved around, the great vehicle agile despite its size. Blackhawk's gunnery was getting better as he practiced, and his first shot exploded into a Tiger. Their hull was thumped again, but the very heavy armor plate held—even if the occupants were temporarily deafened.

Blackhawk's next round exploded the treads of another Tiger and the machine just ran itself out on one side, turning helplessly and grounding.

*Pang! Ping Pang! Pang! Pronnng!*

Machine gun slugs peppered the side of the snorting Warlion and had no effect. Blackhawk swiveled the electrical turret and missed a Tiger by a hair. "Hurry!" he yelled at Chop-Chop.

Andre yelled and through the periscope Blackhawk saw three Tigers coming out of the woods at their side. They were too close, the big cannon couldn't be brought down that low, so Andre slammed on the right hand brakes and the huge machine turned sharply. He rode right up over the first Tiger, tilting into the sky before the Nazi war machine collapsed under him. He ground the second one into the ground and the third tried to escape, but Andre was too fast and ran the Warlion right up its back, crushing it beneath them.

*Pooonnnng!*

Another cannon shell rang the tank and Blackhawk found the turret jammed in a near-forward position.

,And then the first Warlion came around the chateau, its cannon flaming. The shell struck the side of the tank, tipping it over. Blackhawk fell from the seat, hurting his side. The Warlion spun its treads futilely. Like a turtle, it was effectively on its back.

"Out!" he ordered and the Blackhawks tumbled from the tank. Chop-Chop was last and he yelled at them.

"Tank gonna" go boom!"

They kept the overturned tank between them and the roar of the onrushing Warlion. A stone wall was just ahead and they leaped over it just as the tank behind them exploded, its armory of shells sending shards of steel in every direction.

The stone wall was all but knocked down around them by the force of the explosion. Ears ringing, the Blackhawks looked over the rubble to see the mam Warlion standing still, just short of the fiery shell of the destroyed Warlion.

"The explosion knocked them out," Blackhawk yelled to his half-deafened companions. He hurtled the rubble and ran toward the tank. Chop-Chop followed, then Andre, nursing a sprained ankle.

Blackhawk climbed up onto the massive machine and saw the remaining six Tigers coming his way. As he reached for the hatch it opened, knocking him back, and Falkenstein came up, bleeding from a cut across his forehead, and Blackhawk knew the massive scar had come from a previous similar affair. The German clawed at the Luger in his holster but Chop-Chop struck him with a stiff-handed blow at the base of the neck and the Nazi fell back inside.

"You've got to show me how you do that stuff," Blackhawk said, as he jumped feet first into the turret. Andre and Chop-Chop heard several loud pistol shots, then their commander called to them. "C'mon!"

They jumped into the tank and shoved aside the bodies, and soon sent the Tigers running for cover.

They stopped only long enough to dump out the dead bodies and fire a stream of machine gun bullets into the gasoline dump to start the explosions. Then they started rolling toward their hidden Grammians.

"Tie him up," Blackhawk said to Chop-Chop. "I think we'll trundle this kraut back and see if the interrogators can get anything out of him."

The German was tough, there was no doubt of that. But Blackhawk had an idea. He put goggles and a flying helmet on the bound Falkenstein, then strapped him under Andre's plane, snug under the wing against the fuselage. The wide-eyed German screamed at them that they couldn't do that, but Blackhawk just grinned. "All you have to do is tell us everything you know about German tank production and design."

"Never!"

'Blackhawk shrugged. "Okay. Fire 'em up!"



The German's scream of fear was lost in the roar of the engines as the two ships raced down the grassy field and lanced into the air.

Blackhawk flew down below Andre's Grumman and grinned up through his canopy at the wild-eyed German. "Just like I thought," Blackhawk said to Chop-Chop. "There are some people who are afraid to fly."

Chop-Chop chuckled. "He talk now, Brockhawk. You just tell him you givey him nother 'plane ride and he talk."

Blackhawk smiled happily. "Yes, I think so." >

Below and behind, the last of the Warlions exploded. An inquisitive German tank commander coming on the scene had sought to explain the presence of the great derelict machine... and found the booby trap left by the Blackhawks.

## Chapter Seven

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*24 May 1940*

The German war machine had swept most of France and nothing the Blackhawks had done had slowed the advance to the sea very much. General Rundstedt's Army Group A had halted its Panzers temporarily, at Hitler's orders. This gave the French and British a limited amount of time to begin the evacuation toward Dunkirk. Through agents of Levitz's secret network the Blackhawks delivered a thoroughly demoralized Falkenstein to British Intelligence, along with a note saying that if he refused to cooperate offer him a plane ride.

Another coded message came from Levitz's efficient little spy network and Blackhawk assembled his men in the headquarters tent.

"We've got a hit and run mission to do," he told them grimly. "I think this is just the sort of thing we do best." He put his finger on the map of Europe. Under his fingertip lay the mountains of the Black Forest. He pointed at Stuttgart.

"The British lost an agent there. Code name: Bluebird. This agent's an important one. I'm not certain what the information is that she has, but—"

"She?" Olaf grunted.

Blackhawk nodded. "French woman; real name Mireille Hupp. We have to get her."

Hendrickson peered at the map. "We fly up the Rhine maybe? Through the river valley? Very low, huh?"

"A quick pick up and run, eh?" Stanislaus asked.

Blackhawk shook his head. "Um, not quite... the Gestapo has her."

\* \* \*

The six Blackhawk planes thundered through the night a hundred feet off the gleaming chipped surface of the River Rhine. The Mosel was behind then, and the Lahn River, too. They banked through the Hardt Valley, aim\* ing for the cleft of the Keckar River coming down out of the Black Forest. Stuttgart was not far ahead.

Chop-Chop leaned over Blackhawk's shoulder and yelled in his ear. "Few minutes now. Red-green rights on left, Brockhawk."

They both watched carefully, then saw the red and green lights marking the short, dangerous landing strip a British secret agent had marked for them.

The war was still chaotic, with pockets of resistance, both military and civilian, scattered all over. It could be a trap, Blackhawk knew, but he had to try. This was, by his own definition, the sort of mission they did best.

Red-green, red-green. He put the Grumman into a landing pattern and prayed.

The last Blackhawk—Chuck, in his traditional Tail-end Charlie position—was setting down as Blackhawk himself jumped from his cockpit. Several shadowy figures ran toward him and he pulled out his revolver.

A husky voice whispered out the recognition phrase in German and he responded, correctly, in French. "This way," the figure said. "My men will camouflage your planes."

Six of the Blackhawks trotted after them, leaving Chuck behind as guard. He spoke no languages but English— American, actually—and you never could tell when French or German would be handy.

They trotted about a half-mile to a small farm house and there the Blackhawks and their landing crew got a good look at each! other. There were five of the Germans. Two were middle-aged men, one with a bad limp. Two were only boys, fourteen or fifteen. And the fifth was a woman. She was very blonde and healthy looking, and reminded Blackhawk of the smiling bronzed women he had seen at skiing lodges in Austria and Switzerland before the

war.

But this one was not smiling. "I am Lisa, Lisa Buck-holz." She introduced the others, then looked carefully at the Blackhawk leader. "We are German, but we are not Nazis. We hate the Nazis, I want you to know that. But ... it is very hard being against what is happening. There are very few of us and ..." Her blue eyes skipped to her friends. ". .. and we are frightened all the time."

"Yes, I understand," Blackhawk said. "But Bluebird—?"

"Ah, yes. She is here," the woman said, unfolding a prewar Michelin map. "Kornwestheim. It is about twenty kilometers from here."

"In Gestapo headquarters?" Andre asked.

The woman nodded. "They have had her for thirty hours. That can be a lifetime in Gestapo terms." She looked grim. "We have a truck, a farm truck, with a hiding place."

"Let's go," Blackhawk said.

The building was bleak by the early morning light. Its architecture was heavy and ponderous, without grace. All the windows were barred and some were also boarded up. There were four guards at each entrance, arrogant in the black uniforms, Schmeissers slung from their shoulders and gray steel helmets on their heads. -

"A fortress," Hendrickson grunted as they rumbled past in the truck. They looked out through a slit in the camouflage of kitchen crates-and vegetable boxes that covered their small and very cramped hideaway.

"So was Troy," Andre muttered.

"Wooden horse?" Blackhawk smiled. "I think we'll need some costuming."

\* \* \*

"You know," Stanislaus muttered, "we are a long way from home. In Germany. If they catch us we'll be shot as spies, not held as prisoners of war. I'm hungry. I'm tired. I'm bored."

"Nozzing else?" Hendrickson asked. They were in a small, empty apartment on Williamstrasse.

"Yes," the Polish flyer said. "You'd think we'd try our best to stay *out* of the Gestapo's hands, but here we are doing our best to get *in*." He shook his head. "Do we know what we're doing?" "Blackhawk does," Andre said.

Olaf nodded slowly. "We are betting our lives on that, Andre."

Hendrickson was at the window, looking through a slit in the curtains. "Ah .. ." he said and reached for his British .303 Bren, a light machine gun bigger than a rifle. The others drew Lugers and Schmeissers into their hands and stood up. They heard steps, then Blackhawk came into the room, followed by Lisa Buckholz.

"It's set up. They should be here soon." He looked at Hendrickson and Olaf. They nodded and trotted out the door and downstairs. They would hide in the *concierge's* room, just off the entrance.

The rest hefted their weapons and waited. The car and truck arrived almost silently. If they had not been expecting them, the Blackhawks might not have heard their arrival. They gathered close to the door and listened for footsteps on the stairs. There was silence for a moment and Blackhawk supposed they were listening at the door of the apartment across the hall, the apartment where more British agents were supposedly hiding. Then the Blackhawks heard the guttural command and the splintering of wood. Feet thudded and someone shouted. Blackhawk's free hand reached for the doorknob. They flung the door open and Blackhawk rammed his shoulder into the corporal at the top of the stairs, sending him crashing back on the rest. He was across the hall, firing, even as Andre and Stanislaus fired down the stairwell.

The sergeant in the empty apartment turned and Blackhawk shot him down. The officer in the cap with the death's head insignie turned in surprise and got Blackhawk's heavy fist in his face.

Downstairs they heard the heavy drumming of Hendrickson's Bren and the chatter of Olaf's gun, taking care of the remaining soldiers.

They had to move fast. Blackhawk stripped the uniform from the officer only to find it was too small for him. Only Stanislaus could fit into it. Blackhawk took the sergeant's uniform, the blood on it still warm. There were a few pistol shots in the hall, then silence.

Blackhawk saw the knife in Lisa's hand. "No!" he said, but it was too late. The officer's throat was cut and she had a grim look of satisfaction. "It was this one who interrogated my sister, Blackhawk, and now my sister is in an insane asylum."

No time for recriminations. Blackhawk helped load the dead and dying into the truck and the Volkswagen Kibbel-wagen. They artfully arranged the bloody dead to be seen best, with the Blackhawks concealed back of them. They drove both vehicles at high speed through the small town to Gestapo headquarters, honking their horns all the way. The guards gaped at the dead and dying as Stanislaus ordered them to open the gates to the courtyard at the rear of the building.

The Pole jumped out and yelled imperiously at the confused guards to carry the wounded into the hospital. Then Hendrickson and Olaf aimed their Schmeissers at the tousled Lisa and Chop-Chop. The Oriental had a German's blood smeared dramatically on his face to hide his features. The two disguised Blackhawks jerked gunpoints toward the door and the "prisoners" stumbled toward it. Blackhawk gave Chop-Chop a shove as he saw one of the guards frown curiously at the Chinese.

Chop-Chop seemed to stumble and fall against the guard on the right, who cried out and fell. Cursing, Hendrickson yanked the Chinese to his feet and flung him toward the door. No one noticed that the guard wasn't getting up. The staggering Chop-Chop managed to flop against the other guard, who shoved at the gasping prisoner with irritation, then gave a short moan and fell suddenly.

Blackhawk and Olaf scooped up the two unconscious guards, glancing back at those busy with the truckload of wounded Germans. They shouldered quickly into the building, dragging the dead weight of the two unconscious guards.

Stanislaus yelled at the interior guards to help the unconscious guards, then to be given the keys to the interrogation cells. A frowning *Oberführer*, or Master Sergeant, picked up a heavy ring of keys and started to lead the way.

Then he stopped and stared at Stanislaus. "Sir, what section are you with?"

"Luger," he said, showing him the gun.

"*Schnell!*" Hendrickson said at once, aiming his machine gun. The staring Gestapo and civilian clerical staff were rounded up and shoved into a ground-floor holding cell. Olaf grinned at them and patted his Schmeisser. "Keep quiet," he said softly.

Blackhawk trotted down the cement steps into the basement where according to Lisa the interrogation cells were located. They found themselves in a long cement block corridor with heavy wooden doors at intervals. Hendrickson looked through the tiny observation hole of the first and shook his head.

Blackhawk found their target at the second door. He motioned the others to check out the other three doors, then he boldly opened the door and marched in.

It was an interrogation room: stained, scratched walls, a scruffy bare floor, and a sturdy if battered table. Harsh lights glared on the single female prisoner seated in one of the two wooden chairs. She wore a shabby prison dress of shapeless grey. But Blackhawk's eyes were on the toadlike man behind the table, a man clawing desperately for the Luger in his holster.

Blackhawk would have liked to just shoot him. A quick clean death for a man who had made others die so very slowly. But he could not take the chance of alerting others with a gunshot. So he jumped across the room and smashed his machine pistol into the side of the Nazi's head. The Nazi grunted and staggered back, swearing. Blackhawk came at him, but the heavysset man struck out, punching through Blackhawk's guard and striking his shoulder. The Blackhawk leader staggered back, dropping his Schmeisser with a clatter.

The Nazi plunged in, punching hard rights and hard lefts. Blackhawk knocked aside -a haymaker and struck the Nazi twice in the nose, very quick and very hard. Blood spurted and the Nazi sagged back, slumping to the floor, his face bathed in blood.

Blackhawk turned toward the woman who was strapped down and started to help her up. But the Nazi toad lunged at his feet, knocking him down. Blackhawk kicked at him, but to no avail. The<sup>1</sup> man knew how to fight, dirty and well.

Hitler had recruited the dregs of German life in the early years, the ones with nothing to lose, the misfits and neurotics and criminals. This one, Blackhawk knew, had clawed his way through a lot of brutal barfights.

They rolled under the table, biting and kicking. The Nazi rolled and leaped again for the wall, splattering blood from his shattered nose. He pulled a knife from the wall and leaped at the cringing woman in the chair.

Blackhawk rolled out from under the table and kicked at his shins. The man cried out but Blackhawk was too far away to prevent him from putting the knife to the woman's throat.

The Nazi's breath came harshly as he sucked in air. Then he croaked, "No, stop! She dies if—"

As if by magic a knife appeared in the Nazi's throat. He staggered back, looking startled, and the knife in his hand fell. The toad-faced man plucked at the blade in his throat and clawed it out. A fountain of blood followed and the man dropped, a startled look on his face.

Andre stood in the door. "Quick, *mon ami*—they have found us out!"

Blackhawk pulled the wild-eyed and frightened woman to her feet. Abruptly he stopped. "You *are* Bluebird, aren't you?"

She nodded, wide-eyed still. Blackhawk gathered her in his arms and trotted out of the cell. There were two other prisoners being helped up the stairs. "We will hide them," Lisa said.

Hendrickson and Olaf were behind pillars in the main ground floor room. They fired at the other stairs and a dark figure screamed and jumped back. Hendrickson pointed at the door.

Blackhawk handed the woman to Lisa, then he hefted the Schmeisser and yelled to Hendrickson and Olaf, "Cover us!"

There were Gestapo men and guards all over the yard, behind every bit of cover. Blackhawk walked out, carrying the machine gun with one hand down low, wiping his forehead. He looked surprised to see all the gun muzzles aimed at him.

"No, no, everything's all right!" he called out in German. "One of the prisoners tried to escape. We have him bottled up. It's all right, come on out."

Stanislaus took his cue from Blackhawk. He walked 'out, frowning. "Why aren't these men in the hospital? You, sergeant! Get things moving here!"

"But, sir—"

"*Schnell!*" Stanislaus growled. Andre walked out casually, and- exchanged looks with Blackhawk. - The Germans, looking dubious, came out from cover.

"*Now!*" Blackhawk yelled and three Schmeissers chattered from the steps. The Germans, caught without cover, were mowed down. A few scattered shots were fired but none of the Blackhawks were hit.

"Quick!" Blackhawk yelled. He ran to the truck and yanked a dead man from the front seat. Lisa came out with Mireille and there was a burst of fire from the Gestapo headquarters.

Blackhawk started the truck. Andre got into the cab and shoved Blackhawk over. "I know these cars better. You ride . . . what do the Americans call it?"

"Shotgun," Blackhawk grinned.

Olaf came out and jumped in the back, covering for Hendrickson, who came out firing. He thumbed the empty clip from the Bren and jammed in another as he ran for the truck. Andre put it in gear and they rattled out of the courtyard.

Olaf shot at two of the guards and missed, but the men dived for cover. And then they were racing along the road out of town.

Blackhawk got out and stood on the running board to look back. So far, no pursuit. He looked over into the bed of the truck and saw Lisa patting a damp cloth on Mireille's scratches and cuts. Hendrickson was at the rear gate, his Bren aimed behind. Olaf rode on the driver's side, scanning the road ahead. They rumbled into the night.

\* \* \*

The first order of business was to get the released prisoners into hiding and Mireille out of the country. They stopped just long enough to let Lisa and the other prisoners off, then they drove as fast as they could to the field where their Grummans were.

Chuck looked grim as they told him what to do. They put Mireille in the back seat of Blackhawk's plane, the only one adapted for carrying two. Chuck climbed in and took off, giving them a thumbs up salute.

Blackhawk watched the plane take off, then turned to his waiting friends. "Now let's go get the *real* Bluebird," he said grimly. The Blackhawks stared at him.

## Chapter Eight

---

"The *real* Bluebird?" Olaf asked, thoroughly puzzled.

"That wasn't Mireille Hupp?" Andre gaped.

Blackhawk shook his head. "No, that was a plant."

"How do you *know*?" Andre asked.

"I don't... for certain."

Hendrickson jerked a thumb in the direction of the vanished Lisa Buckholz and her partisan friends. "What about her?"

"A dupe ... just as we were. I was suspicious from the first—a little Gestapo jail out in the middle of nowhere? Why not in Stuttgart? Because they didn't want a big mess to cover up." He stared thoughtfully into the dark sky. The sound of Chuck's Grumman had long died away,

"But they lost so many men," Stanislaus pointed out.

"A small price to pay, balanced against what they gained," Blackhawk said.

"But she was tied up, cut up ..." Andre said, thinking of her lush young body.

"Again, a small price to pay," Blackhawk said, looking at his men. "Wouldn't you take a few minor cuts to help win the war?"

"Yeah, but she's a woman," Olaf grumbled.

"And dedicated," Blackhawk said.

"What *was* the big secret?" Stanislaus asked.

"She told me part of it," Blackhawk said. "Just enough to give me an idea of how important it all was. See, I think they expected British Intelligence, or maybe the French. They didn't expect independents like us. But no matter, she saw the opportunity and went with it." He gestured toward England. "She is supposed to have the secret plans of the invasion of England. Because of how the British got her—and no doubt her own excellent cover story—they will believe her."

"Unt put der forces in da wrong places," Hendrickson grumbled. "*Ja*, goot plan." He looked at Blackhawk from under his thick eyebrows. "But what did you tell Chuck?"

"To land her in Scotland, not at Blackhawk Island. To turn her over to Levitz's agents, and they will pass her on to military intelligence. And I told him my suspicions."

"So .. ." Andre said slowly. "She won't know where our base is, she'll think everything's normal, and—"

"And the British will know what the Germans *aren't* going to do," finished Stanislaus. "That's almost as good as knowing what they *are* going to do."

"Dose soldiers they sacrificed, dit dey know?" Olaf asked.

"No," Blackhawk said. "It had to look real. But I'm convinced there is a *real* Bluebird, else how did the Nazis know the code name and all that? And I'm betting she's back there."

Andre lifted his hand in the darkness. "But if we save her, won't the Boche know we are on to them?"

"Not if we do it right," Blackhawk said. "Here's what I have in mind..."

\* \* \*

Blackhawk and Chop-Chop crouched behind a Gelände-wagen, the Third Reich's version of a Jeep. The two guards lay unconscious, tucked inconspicuously under a nearby Kubelwagen, victims of Chop-Chop's lightning karate blows. They watched the Gestapo headquarters quietly.

The wounded had been taken away in red-crossed Verwundeten-Transportwagens and the dead soldiers and Gestapo men were laid out in a ragged row along one side of the courtyard.

"Unless I'm wrong, they'll be taking the real Bluebird out of there, back to Stuttgart," Blackhawk whispered. "Why woman here in first place, Blackhawk?" "Extracting information, getting more of the cover-story for



their false Bluebird," he answered softly. "They will wring her dry, then execute her." He looked at his wristwatch from the light of the Gestapo headquarters. "This buckle of bolts ready to go?"

Chop-Chop nodded. He had hotwired the Gelände-wagen with what Blackhawk thought was suspicious ease. "Leddy to go," he nodded.

Blackhawk hoped the Gestapo would hold to its usual night-time activity. None of his plan would work in daylight. But the Gestapo—and the storm troopers and Brown Shirts—had long used the tactic of coming at night, of late-hours strikes, and he was hoping they would not change.

Chop-Chop touched his arm. "Lookie . . ." Two burly men in black uniforms were carrying out a slim limp figure, holding her under the arms. She appeared barely conscious, her head lolling and her simple dress ripped and stained. They threw her carelessly into **the** backseat of a gray Mercedes-Benz 4x2, a heavy vehicle with an armed driver and a guard in front. The **car** started up, its engine growling loudly in the predawn night. A Kubelwagen with four helmeted SS soldiers came to life and followed the Mercedes out of the courtyard. They drove out of the light and toward Stuttgart.

Blackhawk and Chop-Chop climbed in and started their stolen German jeep and followed.

The countryside was dark, but there was a faint flush of light on their right, off to the east. The road was empty and the two German vehicles were driving with full lights. This deep into Germany and with no organized Allied bombing raids, they were fearless of being seen. Behind them, without lights, Blackhawk raced along.

"It's time," he said. They were far enough from Korn-westheim that any gunfire would not be heard. He shoved his foot to the floor and the vehicle started catching up.

They could see the four soldiers silhouetted against the headlights of the Mercedes in front. Blackhawk waited, once he had moved up fairly close. None of the soldiers looked around and Blackhawk grinned. They'd regret their smug assurance.

He waited until there was a turn ahead. The Mercedes went around it and Blackhawk tromped on the accelerator. He shot ahead, pulled up next to the Kubelwagen and slammed against it with a vicious jerk of his wheel. The startled driver tried to stop it but they were going off the narrow road before he knew what happened.

The crash of the German jeep was noisy, but Blackhawk only flicked on his own lights and roared after the Mercedes. The Gestapo men must think the lights behind them were the original vehicle.

They caught up quickly and Blackhawk sounded the tinny horn repeatedly, shouting in German over it. "Stop! Stop! Something terrible has happened! Stop!"

Chop-Chop crouched- on the seat. He wore a tunic taken from one of the

guards he had clobbered. In his hand was his favorite weapon, a slim, deadly hatchet.

Blackhawk pulled out slightly and edged up on the Mercedes, drowning out the Gestapo officer's angry yell with his horn, creating angry confusion. Then he saw the Mercedes slow and start to pull off.

"Now!" he yelled at Chop-Chop and pulled up next to the big car. Chop-Chop hurled the hatchet at the scowling face of the black-suited officer, who fell back with a cry, the hatchet imbedded in his throat. Then Chop-Chop leaped to the running board of the Mercedes, his stiffened hand chopping hard into the throat of the driver. The car swerved and slid to the right, shaking up everyone in it. Blackhawk had started braking as the Chinese Blackhawk jumped, and was stopped by the time the Mercedes came shuddering to a stop, its engines stalling out, halfway across the road.

Blackhawk pulled out his revolver as he jumped from the Kubelwagen and his aim was good. The second Gestapo man was shakily aiming his Luger at Chop-Chop in the front seat, fighting the guard, but Blackhawk's bullet smashed him against the side of the open car.

The guard let out a cry and tumbled over the door. Blackhawk yanked open the door and looked into the uncomprehending eyes of the battered woman in the rear seat/flanked by two dead Germans. The Blackhawk leader spoke quickly.

"It's all right, you're safe! Take it easy." He spoke the coded recognition phrases and she stared at him. He said them again and she wet her lips and swallowed, then gave him the proper responses.

Blackhawk plucked her from the seat and carried her to the Kubelwagen, putting her in the back. Then he went to the Mercedes and found some blankets as Chop-Chop retrieved his hatchet. Blackhawk looked at his watch, then at the first dim lightening of the eastern skies.

"We better get out of here." Chop-Chop jumped behind the wheel, started up and reversed their direction, driving back toward the little **town** of Kornwestheim. They stopped where they had run the guard vehicle off   the road and found all of the soldiers dead. Blackhawk hoped his men knew what to do. They tore through the early dawn, back toward the secret field.

"There," Stanislaus said.

"Ja," Hendrickson answered.

Far below they could see, in the long low shadows of dawn, the Kubelwagen off the road. Further on they could see the dark shape of the Mercedes, skewed across the road. They tilted over the low-flying Grummans and dived toward the dead men in the ditch.

Their machine guns ripped up the roadway for a hundred yards behind where the Kubelwagen had crashed. Hendrickson was first, spitting lead in a false attack on the road. Stanislaus came just behind him, his guns tic-tacking off the road and into the crashed car and two of the still bodies there.

They lifted up, banked and their guns chattered again. Bits of macadam flew in the air as the bullets struck the highway again, laying a false pattern. The last of the run thumped a score of .50 caliber slugs into the Mercedes and Stanislaus swore.

The car did not catch fire. They needed the flaming wreck to burn out any traces of how the Mercedes had really been stopped—and to mislead the Germans into thinking the corpse of Bluebird was in the wreck.

They shot into the air and banked around. There was not much time. They didn't want any early-rising witnesses. Their twin-engined Grummans came swiftly around and their .50 caliber Brownings spit lead one more time. This time Hendrickson's aim was better and the gas tank exploded. He flew right through the first flash of the fireball and out. Stanislaus **put** another burst into the wreck and they turned back.

Stanislaus grinned. Blackhawk's reasoning had been to get Bluebird away from the rest and obliterate any traces. The Germans—they all hoped—would assume some aircraft from the raiding party had stayed behind to shoot at targets of opportunity. And besides, Blackhawk had reasoned, they thought they had squeezed the secret agent dry. They would write it off as fortunes of war.

Or so Blackhawk hoped.

The two Grummans raced toward the dawn clouds.

"Pull over here," Blackhawk said from the backseat of the Kubelwagen. Mireille Hupp—"Bluebird"—was slumped against him. By dawn light Blackhawk could see her face, puffed and discolored with bruises. She seemed totally exhausted.

The vehicle pulled into the trees not far from the improvised air strip, and they concealed the car in some bushes. Blackhawk carried Bluebird to Andre's Grumman. Olaf and Andre had spent the predawn time ripping everything out of the space behind the seats of their ships. "Herron will give us hell," Andre said as they dragged aside the radio and other gear.

They carefully put Mireille Hupp into the back of his plane and Chop-Chop started to look nervous.

"We not get into that togedder," he said to Blackhawk, pointing at Olaf's gutted ship.

"We aren't," Blackhawk said. "You are."

"We no leave you behind," the karate expert said quickly.

Blackhawk grinned. "You won't. It's just that we have more people going back than we have seats. I think that little trick we did with the tank commander might work."

"You no afraid?" Chop-Chop asked.

"Of course, I'm afraid." He clapped Olaf on the back. "This big Swede may decide to take on the Luftwaffe and I could get thrown off."

"You gonnna ride wing?" Chop-Chop said in disbelief.

Blackhawk nodded. "With a little switch on the tanker's ride. I'll ride on top and with an oxygen tank."

Chop-Chop tried to talk Blackhawk into letting him take the dangerous wing ride, and finally, to stop the argument, Blackhawk put it in the form of an order.

"Let's get me some kind of rig," he said.

"And a parachute," Andre insisted.

The Grummans took off, skimming the trees and heading back tip the Rhine Valley shortly after dawn. Andre flew ahead with the secret agent wrapped in blankets in the cubbyhole behind his seat. Olaf, with greater weight, fell slowly behind. He looked out through his canopy at the black figure in leather on his port wing, marveling at his leader's bravery.

Blackhawk had put a harness of straps around the wing, between the fuselage and the port engine, and was tied into it. He had his goggles cinched on tightly and an oxygen tank lashed to the wing. From time to time he took "swigs" of air from the mask. The speed of the ship could literally rip the breath from his mouth, and it was difficult to breathe.

It was also very, very cold. His hands and feet were numb very quickly. His face felt frozen. He just hung on, trying to put the pain out of mind.

Are we doing any good? he wondered, in his attempt to distract himself from his chilling misery. Are the Black-hawks a *useful* group? Should we just give up and join the conventional air arms of our national services? Chuck could probably get into the unit of Americans or Canadians who had come over to fight with the R.A.F. There was talk of a Free French Air Corps if France fell, and a Free Poland Air Force.

No, he thought. No. We have swift reactions. We can make up our minds and *do* something while papers were still being shuffled in some headquarters office. That was probably why we beat the intelligence services to Bluebird. There was red tape in any conventional military group— and the worst thing the Blackhawks had to do was calm down Herron after a mission in which "his" ships were damaged or misused.

No, there is room for a Blackhawk group.

Another thought crossed his mind: What do we do if one of us is killed? Where do we get replacements? What if I am killed? Who should take my place? Blackhawk made a vow to think about that in the near future. Every commander has the necessity to prepare a subordinate for his post.

The Grumman thundered on, through the growing light, through air space dominated by the Luftwaffe.

The first Messerschmitt was spotted just southeast of Frankfurt. Blackhawk groaned. It was a long way out of Germany yet. Cologne was ahead, then over the border into the Netherlands near Arnhem. But that still would not stop the Germans; they now thought of Europe as their field.

Luckily there were some clouds over Remagen and they lost the Messerschmitt. Andre had already moved ahead and out of sight. Then three Messerschmitt 109s came in out of the sun and the chatter of their guns snapped Blackhawk's head around.

The Grumman moved sluggishly as Olaf twitched the ship out of the line of fire. But Blackhawk knew they were too heavy and too low on fuel for any prolonged battle. He began untying himself from his homemade harness.

"No, Blockhawk!" Chop-Chop shouted and Olaf shot his commander a dark look.

"No!" Olaf yelled. "No, Blackhawk it's—"

But the blackclad figure was slipping off the wing. The ship lifted. The figure dropped. Chop-Chop squirmed around, trying to see the dot that was the leader. He didn't see the parachute open.

Blackhawk delayed pulling the ripcord until the last possible moment. He didn't want to give the Messerschmitts any target if he could help it.

The ground came up fast, the broad, flat fields of the Ruhr Valley. Factories belched smoke not far ahead. He was going down, in broad daylight, into the industrial heart of the Third Reich.

He pulled the ripcord and felt the chute tumble out. Then the straps yanked up and slowed his drop into the trees below. He looked up to the northwest just in time to see the climbing Grumman disappear into some clouds.

The setting sun turned the belching smoke a rusty red. The factories were sooty black, the lines of railroad cars long and noisy. It was the heart of the Fatherland pumping, creating the machinery of war all around him.

Blackhawk crouched in a small outhouse-sized hut that was a switching shed in the outskirts of the vast Cologne train yards. The big brick *bcthnhof*—train station—was off to his left. All afternoon there had been too many guards for him to sneak aboard any train heading west. He was trapped in the tiny hut until dark. He just hoped no one wanted to get in out of the cool night and stay in the hut. He settled down to wait.

By now, he thought, they are back on Blackhawk Island. Chuck has turned the fake Bluebird over to the authorities. Everything was fine, except for one thing.

He was still in Nazi Germany.

Evening came at last. Blackhawk slipped toward a slowly moving train. None of the cars were empty, but it was heading west. He jumped on the side and slipped around between the cars, then crept up to see who was guarding on top.

By the lights of the trainyard he saw an overcoated figure huddled on the top, his rifle slung, only two cars toward the front. There were others, but they were all about four or five cars apart. Blackhawk slipped back down, waiting

for the darkness that would come out of the trainyard.

There are a **lot** of cities between Cologne and the German border: Dusseldorf, Duisburg, and Oberhausen were three of the biggest. Looking out around the cars once they had gotten away from the yard lights, Black-hawk estimated the time before they came upon another town. Then he crept over to the side away from where his targeted guard sat, miserable and bored.

Holding on with his hands he moved along the side of the train. Hanging precariously to the roof edge, Black-hawk moved up two cars. He looked around the corner and saw the guard looking bleakly around, but luckily not down at Blackhawk. The train was coming up on a small town. Blackhawk could see some lights shining. He moved quickly, swinging around the car's end and jumping for the ladder.

The guard started and turned, but Blackhawk's big fist struck up at him even as he unslung the rifle. Blackhawk caught the rifle and the guard as he slumped. He held him semi-erect as they passed through the lights of the small town. Then he pulled him down, tore off his overcoat and tunic and threw him off as they passed over a bridge. Slinging the guard's rifle, he climbed back up and assumed the same slumped, bored position.

None of the other guards seemed to see anything.

Dusseldorf went by, then Rheinhausen and Duisburg. They went into a siding at Oberhausen, and just crept forward until a troop train passed, then they swung back and started moving faster.

It would not be far, perhaps forty miles, to the border. Then maybe fifty miles to the sea, as the bird flies.

But this bird had no wings.

And that gave Blackhawk an idea.

They stopped for several hours in a siding and one of the guards wandered back to talk, but Blackhawk kept bundled and limited his side of the conversations to negative and positive grunts and a lot of yawns. Finally the guard went back to his post and about an hour later the train started west again.

Blackhawk wondered what the train held and the next time they stopped in a siding to wait for a train, he climbed to the ground and pretended a search of the cars on either side of him, just a lazy, perfunctory look as far as the other guards were concerned.

But the markings and seals on the cars told him much. The train carried ammunition, tinned food and—no doubt for the officers—a refrigerated car full of meat.

It was the ammunition that interested him the most.

Just after dawn he saw an airfield not far from Arnhem. He couldn't tell if it was civilian or military at that distance, but he decided it was time to leave the train. There was just one little thing he had to do.

From the trousers pocket of his Blackhawk uniform he pulled a small sabotage device called a fire pencil. It was slim, the size of a small fountain pen, and dull black. Slinging his rifle he climbed down between the food car and the ammunition freight car, and pried at the ventilation window with his bayonet. It popped open and he took the pencil, twisted it and tossed it through.

The twist had broken a seal; in fifteen minutes the acid in one end would have eaten through the diaphragm and combined with the chemical in the other end. There would be a short, fiery burst of flame for about a minute. Blackhawk just hoped it would be enough to start a good blaze going in the wooden crates of the ammo boxes. Then he jumped off the train.

Blackhawk tossed the rifle ahead of him and jumped, rolling into some bushes, hopeful that he wasn't seen. But he was. A guard near the end of the train saw him and pointed, yelling.

Blackhawk decided to brazen it out. He staggered to his feet, holding his head, acting dazed, until the last car went by. Then he started to run after it, waving, and stumbled. He tried to get up, then collapsed. Through slitted eyes he saw the last two guards laughing and pointing at him.

When the train had gotten a quarter mile ahead he got to his feet and started to walk dejectedly along the tracks. It was what any guard might do who had fallen off a train. When the train had gotten far enough ahead, he left the tracks and started toward the airfield. He looked back and saw one of the train cars on fire.

It was a civilian field, deserted except for a squad of German soldiers guarding the few civilian planes left there. Blackhawk looked over the layout from a ditch, then backed off and retreated down the road. He had decided he was in the wrong uniform.

The young Navy lieutenant was entirely the wrong branch of the service, but he was the first officer Blackhawk had seen in two hours. He'd have to do.

The officer sat impatiently in a light armored car, a Horch Sd Kfz 221, outside a small bar in the small village near the airport. There was a Seaman First Class, in his dark trousers and white middie blouse, guarding the door with a rifle, the black band on his white cap fluttering down his back.

Blackhawk slipped between two buildings and found an unlocked back entrance. He looked around a high-backed booth and saw two officers drinking with a third. The two were Artillery in blue grey, the other was a three-stripe Navy man in dark blue-black. The bartender was a heavy-set German civilian.

Blackhawk would have preferred a machine gun, but he had to work with what he had. He jumped out, put a round into the Navy man, then worked the bolt on the German Mauser to shoot at—and miss—the two Army men. They

grabbed for their Lugers and Blackhawk leaped for the floor. He threw the Mauser aside and got out his own revolver. He aimed between the tables and killed one officer, but the other ran for the door, colliding with the Navy guard coming in.

Blackhawk fired twice, getting them both, then felt a stinging blow on his left shoulder. He fell, twisting, to see the German bartender with a beer barrel starter, a heavy wooden mallet, about to strike again. His left arm numb, Blackhawk twisted and pulled the trigger.

Click.

The gun was empty.

Learn to count your shots, idiot! he told himself as he | kicked the legs out from under the bartender, who fell and was knocked unconscious.

Blackhawk scrambled to his feet, empty pistol in hand, just as the Navy lieutenant came through the door. He had no gun and only a small ornamental dagger, still in its scabbard, hanging from his belt.

Blackhawk menaced him, thinking the young man rather foolish to come charging into a shooting scrape unarmed. But his uniform was the only one that wasn't bloody.

The armored car jerked and swerved as Blackhawk got the hang of it, moving along the narrow country road toward the airport. What he needed now, he thought, was luck. He had no idea what the Artillery men were doing with a couple of Navy officers and didn't care. Looking over Artillery emplacements or having a picnic, he was in too much danger to care at all.

He almost overran the guards at the airport entrance. In his very best Prussian-accented German, with every iota of arrogance he could muster, he snarled at them to open the gate.

They didn't want to, but authority was something they always gave in to, and that was what Blackhawk counted on. He even ordered one of the guards aboard, to direct him to the Fregattenkapitan's aircraft.

That confused the guard and Blackhawk realized he might be overdoing it. "The one that's fueled and ready to go," he snapped.

"But, sir, orders—"

"Orders? I have orders, private! Which one? This is an emergency."

And it was. The bartender and the lieutenant could not stay unconscious or tied up forever.

The plane the guard rather shakily took him to was an old ship, a Heinkel once used by the Luftwaffe back in the days when they had been forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles from having an air corps. It was a biplane, a 1928 He 37, but it had a full tank of gas.

Blackhawk simply got aboard, fired up the engines and took off, leaving the gaping guard behind.

Even in the old plane Blackhawk Island was not that far away. All he had to do was avoid the Luftwaffe, the British—who would recognize the lines of the



Heinkel— and any unfriendly anti-aircraft guns. And for that matter, he thought, birds. It wouldn't take much to bring this old crate down.

He flew almost directly north, along the Netherlands coast, **out** over the swamps, passed the West Frisian Islands, and across the North Sea toward Blackhawk Island.

Nobody bothered him. It was actually a lovely day for flying.

## Chapter Nine

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*1 June 1940*

The evacuation of the British and French at Dunkirk continued, with heavy losses of men, ships and planes. The Belgians had surrendered without even consulting the other Allies. The road direction signs in Great Britain had been taken down to confuse any possible invaders. President Franklin Roosevelt introduced a "billion-dollar" defense spending bill. The German U-boats were very active, sinking many ships—both naval and supply—in the North Atlantic. The Blackhawks had been flying few missions against the Germans, but were restocking their island for what seemed like imminent invasion. The false Bluebird had been turned over to MI5 and the real Bluebird sneaked into London to her control a few days later. Then the bombs started dropping on London.

These were not the first bombs, but what was surprising was that they seemed to come out of nowhere, out of a thin cloud cover.

They fell in a long stick of explosions across central London, from Paddington Station northeast. No air raid siren had sounded and the authorities at first suspected they were a series of terrorist explosions, from planted dynamite caches. But then eyewitnesses said they saw actual bombs plummeting down.

In the War Room, deep under London, a Brigadier General named Sims ordered the super-secret coast installations of a new defensive weapon called R.A.D.A.R. to sweep the skies over London.

Another string of bombs fell, killing civilians and military alike.

The R.A.D.A.R. station reported something very large at the extreme upper, range of their devices, a blip higher than any bomber then known.

And much larger.

The R.A.F. sent up interceptors, but could not even come within eyesight of whatever it was circling the capital of England. An unarmed reconnaissance

plane, stripped down further than usual, was sent up from the ' station at Maidstone. It got high enough for the pilot to report that the object was an airplane, but enormous. There were no markings on the sky-blue craft except one: a huge swastika.

The recon plane could not get close enough for further identification, and secretly the pilot was just as happy. The ship seemed to bristle with gun ports.

Nothing was told the British public, except that a high altitude German bomber had evaded the patrols and had dropped a limited number of bombs.

However, the High Command added up the number of hits, something not available to the public, and it came out almost three times the capacity of the Junker Ju-88 A.

Then they added up the time from the first bomb strikes to when R.A.D.A.R. reported the blip heading east. It came to more than six times the normal over-target time of any German ship.

"That means they can sit there, out of reach of both our guns and our planes, and take their time to aim quite properly," Brigadier Sims said softly.

Major-General Digby snorted. "There will be panic when this is known."

"They can't have very many of them," Sims said. "Probably a prototype, on... excuse me, sir ... test flights."

"Humph. With London as the test site." The general drew down his heavy brows as he thought. "Ask the R.A.F. chappie if there is anything, anything at all, that can be used to get to that ship. A civilian airplane, if needs be. Slap a Vickers on it and send it up."

"Ahem. .." Sims said and caught Digby's look. "The pilot of the reconnaissance aircraft said that it was quite heavily armed. Be suicide for the chap."

"Yes, and bad for London if we don't try. Find some-one."

A very light civilian plane was found and armed that afternoon, but the German bomber was back sooner than expected.

"What the devil!" Sims explained. "That chap had no time to fly to any base in Germany! He's been gone, what... less than two hours ... about eighty, ninety minutes, eh? Well, send up that civilian plane."

The plane did go up, but the pilot almost froze to death at the altitude and came down without getting close enough to see anything.

Three bomber loads were dropped across London that day. Only three hit the Thames. The rest struck houses. And children.

The report got to Blackhawk Island along with the first reports of the German invasion of Holland. The Blackhawks scrambled, and used something thought up by Andre—temporary decals of the circular symbol of the Royal Air Force.

The "test" turned out well and the British ignored the Blackhawks, but that was because they had their hands full. That night, back at the Island (while Herron was stomping around complaining about the holes and the overheated

guns and the lousy way the pilots were treating *his* airplanes) Blackhawk brought together his pilots.

"I think we were wrong out there today," he said.

"*Wrong?*" Olaf grunted. "Yumpin' Yimminy, we shot down six o' them Chermans!"

Blackhawk nodded. "Yes, and got in the way of regular fighters. You saw that flight of French. They didn't expect us there and had to veer off. The airways heated up over that one!" He shook his head. "No, I think we're wasted on that sort of operation."

"Like racehorse pulling plow?" Chop-Chop asked.

"Right. We're going to have to work harder on our special operations," Blackhawk said.

"What about this superbomber thing?" Stanislaus asked. "We don't know much, but..." He shrugged.

"Yes, I was going to mention that," Blackhawk said. "The report we got was that they tried every stripped-down ship they could find, but no go. Couldn't get close enough."

"Well, dot lets us oudt," Hendrickson grumbled.

"No ... not quite," Blackhawk said. "Look at it this way. That ship comes from somewhere, it goes somewhere. It gets bombs and fuel somewhere. *Some place* it lands!"

"Aha!" Andre said.

"Aha," agreed Blackhawk.

Stanislaus flicked through the typed report sent from Levitz's agent. "Says here it has an approximately ninety-minute turn-around time. Back over target in an hour and a half or so."

"What's the speed?" Hendrickson said, sitting down at the table and grabbing a piece of paper. Stanislaus told him the approximation the General Staff had, and they computed how far ... and how near ... from London was the turn-around time.

They looked at the arcs on the map. The only parts of land were either Great Britain and France. But that part of France was still occupied by French and British forces.

"That leaves the North Sea," Chuck said.

"*Over* the North Sea," Blackhawk said.

"Refuelly in air?" Chop-Chop suggested, but didn't believe it.

"Possible, I suppose. But the *bombs?*" Andre was very dubious. "They couldn't land and refuel and take off in that time. There's no report of any German aircraft carrier?"

Stanislaus shook his head. "I don't think Germany has an aircraft carrier. Besides, the Navy'd spot it. The English Channel isn't that big."

There was a silence, then Blackhawk spoke. "What if this super-bomber flew *toward* a refueling ship, then flew back toward London as it refueled?"

"But what gets that high—and carries fuel, too?" Chuck asked.

"Maybe it comes down," Olaf suggested. "The big one comes down to the top of the resupply ship's altitude."

Grins began around the table. They lasted until Andre reminded them again of the bombs. "Those are heavy and tricky. How are they handled?"

Gloom descended for a long moment until Blackhawk spoke. "Why don't we just mark out an area we think is the bomber's turnaround spot, and stake it out?"

"We'll have to lighten the Skyrockets," Hendrickson pointed out. "Take out all but one or two guns, fly in our underwear, measure the fuel very tightly..."

They all groaned. "It'll be too cold to fly in our shorts, Hendrickson," Blackhawk said, "but the rest is possible. I suggest we do this. Pick three spots and lighten three planes, with the others flying bottom cover in full gear."

They nodded and bent over the map, marking out the three overlapping areas. Blackhawk went to talk to Her-ron, who grumbled, but suggested other things they could remove. "A flare gun is lighter than your radio. Take the radio out and use the gun... if you have to. You won't be that far apart."

"Getting pretty primitive, aren't we?"

"War is primitive," Herron granted.

The patrol split, with Andre, Chuck and Blackhawk—the three lightest pilots—lifting their stripped-down Gram-mans into the higher altitudes. It was the third day of their patrol. The mystery bomber had dropped well over two hundred bombs on London in a series of destructive passes, methodically attempting to strike every portion of this world-class city.

But the Germanic passion for order had given the Blackhawks another clue. They had timed the flights and refined the areas they lurked in. This time, they thought, they'd strike pay dirt.

"There!" Chuck yelled, then remembered there was no radio. He stuck the flare gun out the window and started to fire. Then he saw Blackhawk's wings wagging and knew the big bomber had been spotted.

It came on faster than they had anticipated, and at a lower altitude than it operated over London. Chuck spotted a sudden green flare off **to** the east, from Andre's position. He searched the sky and found a tiny, growing dot: another big plane. The supply plane.

He started to climb. It quickly grew even colder. Chuck fired a couple of rounds **through** his two remaining guns to warm them up. **But the** valiant Grumman was simply inadequate to the **task**. **Both** planes were far too high, well above the top range of **the** fighters.

Chuck watched in frustration as the supply ship grew closer. It was then he thought he could not believe his eyes. The supply ship did something he had never seen any other ship do!

\* \* \*

"It *landed* on the big bomber?" Herron was incredulous. "Impossible!"

"No, think of it this way. How does an aircraft carrier work?" Blackhawk asked. "It runs *into* the wind, the plane approaches, the wind slowing it. The *relative* speed is reduced."

"You mean it may be going two hundred miles an hour," Hendrickson said, "but if the supply plane is *also* going two hundred the difference is zero?"

Blackhawk nodded. "There are other factors, of course. The smoothness of the air, the skill of the pilots, the way they have rigged the top of the bomber, and so on. I suggest that they have the bombs loaded in something like big clips, such as rifles use. They let them go, let gravity take them down."

"And meanwhile they are filling the fuel tanks," Chuck commented. "A pretty slick operation."

"And one that tells us what we have to do," Blackhawk said with a faint smile.

"Uh-oh," Olaf said in a stage whisper. "He smiles and we fly low."

"We follow the supply ship," Hendrickson said.

"Get aboard and fly that sucker back," Chuck said.

"Blowee bomber bye-um-bye," said Chop-Chop happily.

"Oh, is that all?" Andr6 said. "I thought it was going to be something difficult. Just get into Nazi Germany, find our way through unknown territory, get onto a base that has *got* to be rather fancily guarded, overpower a crew without rousing anyone, take off without having anyone suspect a thing, then get to a rendezvous which may be someplace *other* than where we saw them, get aboard the blasted bomber and saw the limb off."

"Please?" Chop-Chop said. "No understand limb."

"How do we get down? At that altitude if we use parachutes we'll freeze coming down. If we delay the chute opening to get down to warmer air faster, we'll go into the Channel and freeze *there*." He looked around. "Did I miss anything?"

Andre nodded. "We might be able to fly the big ship down to an RAF base."

"And get shot to pieces, bringing in a German bomber," Stanislaus said.

"Well, we could fly in down to an altitude safe enough to jump," Chuck said.

Blackhawk spoke up. "I think I have an idea which might work." He told them what it was and they looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

"Well . . . okay, if you say so, boss," Chuck said.

"Donnerwetter," Hendrickson grumbled. "Veil, why not? It might vork."

"Now the next thing is to find out where the supply ship comes from," Blackhawk said.

"An' how many mans in big ship in sky," Chop-Chop added.

"Okay," Chuck grinned, "so we don't know a thing or two."

"Or three or a hundred and twelve," Andre said.

## Chapter Ten

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Andre's finger stabbed at the big operations map. "Right here. Zwischenahn, on the North German Plain."

"Close to the Netherland's border," Hendrickson said thoughtfully.

"Yes, not in a place anyone would suspect," Blackhawk said, "yet well within the protected zone."

"How well protected?" Olaf asked.

"No more or less than any Luftwaffe base, I suppose," Andre said. "Perhaps they don't want to draw attention to it... or—"

"Or there are secrets to that base," Stanislaus muttered.

They looked at the dot on the map. Zwischenahn was a small town on the fluvial plain north of the central hills of northern Germany.

Chuck spoke what was in their minds. "How y'all figger we gonna get in there?"

"All of us aren't," Blackhawk said. He looked at Stanislaus. "You speak German." The Polish flyer nodded. "Hendrickson does, too. That's who goes in with me. Only we'll need some disguises."

Andre shrugged. "That I can help you with, *mon capitain*, but why so few?"

"Because we'll need the rest of you in the Grumman's." Blackhawk pointed at the map. "The Germans are going to help us get into that base. But first, we need a German aircraft, and some uniforms."

"Oh, is that all?" Andre said. "I'll phone the order in right away."

"I know where we can find what we need," Blackhawk said.

"So do I, pard," Chuck said, "but the guys flyin' 'em are dead set against loanin' 'em out."

Blackhawk smiled thinly. "It involves a little risk ..."

Chuck groaned.

Liverpool is the huge seaport on the west side of Britain, on the Irish Sea. Across the River Dee is the county of Lancaster. Near the city of St. Helens was an airdrome reserved by the Royal Air Force for the evaluation of enemy aircraft. To this site were brought wrecks, ships with minor damage, and all manner of manuals, spare parts, secret information, and aeronautical experts.

Mechanics put whatever ships they could back into flying condition so that civilian test pilots, experienced serving officers of the R.A.F., and pilots who, for physical reasons, were no longer certified to fly combat missions, could fly and test these ships.

On the excellent theory that you fight better when you know what the enemy fought with, they ran simulated combat missions against R.A.F. planes. German bombers—usually repainted with R.A.F. colors—flew against specific targets in Lancaster, Cumberland, Westmorland and York

counties. Messerschmitts with English pilots flew against Spitfires and Hurricanes, and made attacks on Bristol Blenheims and Vickers Willingtons.

Evaluations were made, reports compiled, and the British pilots lectured to squadrons of pilots all over England and Scotland. It was here that the Blackhawks came.

Hendrickson wore the uniform of a British brigadier general. He looked pompous and haughty and kept his mouth shut. Andre wore a French uniform, Blackhawk a Canadian uniform. Stanislaus wore civilian clothes, carried a briefcase and made a lot of notes.

They slipped under the barbed wire about three in the morning, crept around until they found a staff car, then hid until first light. They hot-wired the staff car and got in. Everyone practiced being very deferential to Hendrickson in his general's uniform.

The early crew fueling a Dornier 17, a light bomber with two wings and the original Luftwaffe paint job, looked surprised when the staff car came swiftly across the tarmac and squealed to a stop near them. The officers and civilian climbed out, with the general shaking his head negatively to the stream of words from the Canadian.

"Sir, my theories are correct, and I can prove it in one flight!" The general looked dubious and gave a brief return salute to the sergeant in charge of the detail.

"The ship ready, sergeant?" the civilian asked. When the non-coms answered in the affirmative, the civilian made a note. "Completely fueled? What about ammunition?"

"Uh, no, sir, no ammunition, sir." He looked puzzled. "Sir?" he said to the Canadian captain. "Are you thinking of taking this aircraft, sir?"

"Yes, sergeant, of course." He turned to the general again. "Brigadier, the Dornier has a blind spot. Now..." He looked at his wristwatch. "My lads are coming in in, um, eighteen minutes. I want you to see yourself. It's the only way."

"Sir—" the sergeant said, but the group was moving toward the plane and ignoring Mm. The gassing crew had finished and had moved back.

The Canadian turned to the French officer. "Major Mezieres, would you please pre-flight this bird?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*" Andre climbed into the ship and worked his way to the cockpit. The general still seemed reluctant, eying the German craft suspiciously.

"Brigadier, you've come all this way, why not take a few minutes and see for yourself? I'll show you that there *is* a distinct zone of vulnerability, twenty to thirty-three degrees from the horizontal—"

They were getting into the plane. The ground crew sergeant spoke. "Sir, the plane is supposed to be reserved for the fourth evaluation team—um, they're due at nine hundred hours, sir."

"Plenty of time, sergeant, plenty of time," the civilian said. He paused to

make a note. "Your name, please, sergeant?"

"Crawley, sir ... sir?"

"Thank you, sergeant." He made a note and climbed through the hatch. The starboard engine began to wind.

The sergeant motioned back his crew as the port engine coughed and caught. He saw another staff car coming from the direction of the control tower, but the Dornier was starting to roll.

The young officer who jumped out of the staff car as the Dornier rumbled toward the end of the runway returned Crawley's salute and spoke quickly. "Sergeant, who the devil is that?"

"A brigadier, sir, and some foreign gentlemen." The Dornier gathered speed and started down the runway. "Making some kind of test, sir."

"Are they?" the officer said, watching the ship rise. "Well, I trust they know it isn't healthy to wander too far from here without authorization. One of our laddies might not know it's a tame bird."

"No, sir."

The Dornier flew into the clouds and was gone.

Chuck looked Hendrickson up and down. "Ya ol' Dutchie, ya make a better Heinie general than ya do a Britisher," he said, grmhing. Hendrickson glowered. He wore high black boots, a long gray topcoat that came below his knees, and a ceremonial sword. The rose pink lapels were turned back to reveal a starched white shirt and black tie. A high-peaked officer's cap sat on his well-cropped white hair. It was the uniform of an Engineer Corps general of the Luftwaffe. Beneath the topcoat, however, was no uniform of a general, but that of a Blackhawk. The original owner of the German uniform had managed to get it all bloody.

Chuck looked at Stanislaus, in the uniform of an *Vnteroffizier*, or sergeant. Blackhawk wore the flying suit of a fighter pilot, although it was winter gray instead of the proper summer tan. A bright yellow scarf at the throat hid the fact that he, too, wore a Blackhawk uniform beneath his bulky flying suit. "Trick or treat?" he grinned.

The three men walked quickly out to the Dornier, sitting ready on the tarmac of Blackhawk Island. Herron said, "She's all ready, proper German ammo in the guns, some expended."

Blackhawk nodded his thanks and the three disguised Blackhawks climbed into the light bomber.

The rest of the 'Hawks watched them take off, then turn east and head toward Nazi Germany.

By skimming the waves they got through the Allied patrols, and then rising to operational flight levels over the Netherlands, they penetrated Germany. With Hendrickson in the co-pilot's seat and Stanislaus in the rear gun turret, they waited for the challenging call. It was not long in coming.



The voice asked them to identify themselves and Blackhawk began his transmission, flicking the radio switch on and off erratically to simulate difficulties. He said they were part of a special flight from Norway and had run into British Hurricanes over the North Sea. They had a general aboard with vital information for Berlin, but the controls were pretty well shot up. Blackhawk insisted that they try to fly all the way to Berlin.

Of course, he had no intention of doing so. Three Messerschmitt 109 s came up to look at him, flew quite close and received a glowering look from "General" Hendrickson. They went back to base and soon after Blackhawk reported increased difficulties. It was late afternoon when he reported that all but three of the crew had bailed out over Friesland, and that he must set down as soon as possible.

They tried to divert him to Oldenburg to the east, near Bremen, but he somehow just couldn't hear their transmission. There was an airdrome at Zwischenahn, he said, and cut his transmission in the middle.

Blackhawk grinned at Hendrickson. "My German good enough?"

Hendrickson shrugged. "Bit of a Polish accent, but sufficient."

They continued to drop lower. In the rear, Stanislaus got the gasoline cans ready.

There was a waiting trio of Luftwaffe planes, which' tried to divert the crippled Dormer from landing at Zwischenahn, but Blackhawk's radio sputtered to life long enough for words like "vital mission," "general," and "top priority," to get through.

Then he crashlanded it in the soft dirt next to the main landing strip. They were considerably shaken, but not too badly damaged. Unbuckling, they hurried back through the ship as Stanislaus sloshed gasoline about. They dived out through the hatch as the Polish flyer struck a match.

*Whoom!*

The ship went up in a ball of fire, knocking the Black-hawks to their hands and knees. They staggered toward an armored car, the six-wheeled Sd Kfz 221, which rolled up, the young major in charge very suspicious. He looked at the burning wreck—quite plainly a Dornier 17—and without expression offered them a ride to headquarters.

Hendrickson limped. All part of the plan. If the Germans tried to hustle them out too soon, he could plead injury and need for rest first; if the timing was right, he could go bravely on despite the pain.

Brigadiers were called *Generalmajors* in the German army and they seemed to have scores of them, Blackhawk thought. It was. a common enough rank not to cause suspicion, and high enough to make a subordinate hesitate before asking questions.

Blackhawk was very solicitous of his "general," which gave him an excuse to evade questions. Hendrickson seemed to manage a slight groan whenever an awkward question was raised.

At the wooden building that served as headquarters they were given coffee,

and Hendrickson was given a t to rest on while his adjutant found new transportation.

Blackhawk wore the insigne of a major, as well as an iron cross, the legacy of Baron von Tepp. A swift reconnaissance of the field showed no unusual aircraft, which meant they had to wait. It should not be much longer, he thought as he argued with the major in charge of operations, trying to obtain a "suitable" airplane in which to continue their flight to Berlin.

Then there was a honking sound outside. Suddenly everyone became very efficient. The major asked politely if Blackhawk and his sergeant minded waiting in an inner room until the all clear.

But the honking was not an air raid siren, the British were not making bombing missions to that area, and that meant only one thing: the Germans did not want unauthorized eyes seeing the arrival of the supply plane.

Instead, they went to sit with the "general," and told him in low voices what they suspected. "We know they must have at least two supply planes. One going to or at the big ship, the other here, or just coming or going. Around the clock, practically."

Hendrickson heaved himself up in the cot. "I vill see." He paused outside the door, drew back his shoulders and assumed the imperious expression of one who never has to wait and was damned annoyed at doing so now.

Hendrickson limped out, chin up, and Blackhawk and Stanislaus heard his angry bellows. After a few minutes he stomped back in and fell onto the bed. Blackhawk raised his eyebrows and Hendrickson nodded. "Big," he said, "a very big ship. Four motors."

They thought a moment. They couldn't wait until the ship took off, obviously; yet if they moved too soon the aircraft would not be refueled. Blackhawk estimated the tank capacity needed for four motors and how long it must take to fill them.

"It must be smooth as butter," he muttered to his friends. "They must not suspect." He looked at his watch. "All right, General, phase two."

Hendrickson got up and limped angrily out, growling at everyone in sight, demanding a staff car. If no plane was available he would *drive* to Berlin and see the Fihrer.

There was a flurry of protests and a few young officers even momentarily attempted to stop him going out, but Hendrickson barked at them and they fell back. "The German's great weakness," he said in an aside to Blackhawk, "is a reverence for authority . . . blind obedience is not a virtue."

In his wake Blackhawk attempted apologies to the surprised and insulted officers. Hendrickson limped to the nearest staff car and climbed in, ordering out the driver imperiously, then sat back arrogantly to await his own driver. Stanislaus shrugged an apology to the *feldwebel* and they all got in.

There was a huge plane out on the darkened field, with a cluster of ground crew busy all over it. None of the Blackhawks seemed to even notice, but they saw everything. Stanislaus took the staff car around the headquarters building

and toward the main gate. There Hendrickson made a scene, snarling at the guards that, since he had crashlanded on their miserable airstrip, he could hardly have the proper papers, could he?

Stanislaus drove on. They pulled onto the highway and started along the perimeter fence. Blackhawk looked back and saw that the last of the headquarters men had gone back inside. "All right, go back," he said to Stanislaus.

The Polish pilot turned the awkward vehicle around and they approached the main gate. "The general's forgotten something," Blackhawk said with an apologetic smile. The *leutnant* in charge started to protest, Hendrickson kicked at the driver's seat and impatiently ordered him on.

They passed through unchallenged and Blackhawk let out a long breath of air. They drove along the inside of the fence, on the patrol path, approaching their burned-out wreck of a Dornier, and stopped. In the car lights, they all got out and moved into the wreck.

They moved out in circles, looking down, as if searching for something in the grass. Then one by one they slipped out of the light from the staff car's headlights and ran down the dark strip toward the huge supply plane.

Blackhawk was the first one seen by the captain in charge and the German officer's hand went to his holstered gun. But Blackhawk's smile and conciliatory gesture stopped him. He was aware of the looks from the soldiers loading the ship, and turned with a smile to the "general"—now no longer limping—who came out of the darkness, followed by his "sergeant."

"General Starn, this is the Führer's greatest weapon, well, this and the great plane over London."

"Ja," Hendrickson said, looking around, returning the airmen's salute casually. He started to go aboard but the captain in charge stepped in front of him.

"Sir, I—"

Hendrickson fixed him with a glare that would peel paint. "Yes, *leutnant*?"

"Uh, *hauptmann*, sir," the captain said.

"It will be *leutnant* by dawn if you do not get out of my way," Hendrickson said in a low but powerful voice. "I have been sent here by our great leader himself—*Heil Hitler!*—to evaluate this operation!"

"*Heil Hitler!*" the distressed captain said. "But, sir, I have orders that no—"

"And I haf *my* orders!" Hendrickson glared. He looked at Blackhawk. "Get this man's name and service number!"

"Sir!" Blackhawk responded. He took a pen from a breast pocket and leaned toward the confused officer. "*Bitter*

"An ... an evaluation, Herr General?"

"Ja," Hendrickson said, inspecting the way the bombs—in large wooden "clips" as Blackhawk had surmised—were being loaded.

"The general is making an evaluation on all experimental programs against the enemy. We have just come from Norway," he said confidentially, as if the

German captain knew what that meant. He didn't, but didn't want to say so.

Hendrickson simply moved to the ladder and climbed aboard. Blackhawk took another appraising look at what he could see in the dark. It seemed to be a Heinkel 111, only blown up, with two more engines, as if the plans had been photocopied and enlarged in some way. It was the biggest aircraft which Blackhawk had ever seen, even larger than the American Flying Fortresses, the B-17s.

This plane alone, he thought, is quite a technological achievement... and there is still the *big* one in the air over London.

There was no more opposition. He climbed in, followed by Stanislaus, and found himself in a narrow passage between huge tanks. Petrol tanks, with the racks of bombs further back.

"Didja notice the landing gear?" Stanislaus asked.

Blackhawk nodded. They had double double-wheels, widely spaced, a most unusual configuration.

They moved toward the front of the ship, but not into the pilot's compartment, stopping just back of it, where Hendrickson brought Blackhawk's attention to a compartment filled with very unmulinary items. A case of French champagne, another case of schnapps, four cases of Dortmunder beer, and a negligee.

Blackhawk fingered the material. Real silk. He raised his eyebrows to Hendrickson, who shrugged.

They heard the hatches being closed. One by one the engines were started up. Blackhawk edged closer to where he could see into the pilot's compartment. A pilot, copilot, radio man and one other were riding beneath the glassed-over canopy. Blackhawk watched how they handled things during the takeoff. He let them clear the ship through all the air corridors to the coast, while he wondered what the fourth man, a *leutnant*, was for.

- In normal operations he would be a bombardier, but it was not this plane which would drop the bombs. He sat forward and below the two pilots, in the bombardier's seat, but acted as navigator, checking and rechecking a map.

It was full dark outside now and Stanislaus went toward the rear to eliminate any crewmen he found there. He returned in a few minutes with a few drops of blood on his Luftwaffe uniform, but with a wolfish grin on his face. It was *very* cold at that altitude.

Then the huge supply plane slowed. Blackhawk, peering past the pilots, saw nothing ahead. But the radioman saw him. At the first startled look in his direction Blackhawk strode into the control compartment, drawing his Luger. He put it to the head of the radioman, who looked sick, and gestured for Stanislaus.

The Pole moved swiftly, slapping a strip of adhesive across the radioman's mouth and turning him around to tie his hands. He shoved him back and Hendrickson took him deeper into the ship. Then Stanislaus and Blackhawk waited to be discovered.

There must be a codeword, a procedure, that would get them aboard the great bomber ahead. Only they didn't know it. They waited as long as they could, then Blackhawk gestured.

A gun muzzle against the neck is something relatively few people have felt, but which almost everyone recognizes ... and understands.

The pilots turned their heads very slowly, then their eyes became even larger when they saw two Germans in uniform holding the Lugers. Stanislaus gestured for the co-pilot to get up, which he did. The Pole took him into the back, and then he and Hendrickson returned. The walrus-moustached older man moved down into the bombardier's bay and put a gun to the young officer's head.

"Proceed as usual," Blackhawk said. "We intend no harm. This is a test of your security," he said calmly, but loudly, above the noise of four large engines. "So far you have not done well, but you must proceed just as if we were enemy agents who *would* certainly kill you if you did not cooperate."

The pilot nodded dumbly, obviously shaken and confused. Blackhawk felt a momentary pang of regret. Sometimes aviators were too far above things. They dropped bombs, but did not see the results. Fighters straffed roads and cities and installations, but did not see the broken, bleeding bodies up close. They were far removed from the dust and stink and spilt blood of war. They got up from warm beds, had a warm meal, flew in clean ships to the enemy and flew back to a drink and a warm bed.

The radio crackled and Blackhawk pressed the gun against the pilot's head. The pilot nodded, swallowed, and said, "*Kriegadler Ein*, this is—" He gave a series of code numbers, any one of which, Blackhawk knew, could be a tipoff.

*Kriegadler*, he thought. War Eagle. *Ein* meant "one," but were there more? England could not handle very many deadly "war eagles." He searched the night and suddenly there was a light ahead.

Actually, it was a tiny series of lights, a double row of lights atop a dark form. The landing lights aboard the *Kriegadler*, the way the supply ship could contact and transfer cargo.

Blackhawk had thought it out, thinking of how *he* would have built it. Knowing that it had already been done was a great help. He would have made some kind of track, to align the two ships, then grapples that would bind them together. But the supply ship would need to keep its own engines going to avoid becoming a dead weight on the *Kriegadler*. Hatches in the bottom of the supply ship would open directly into hatches in the roof of the bigger ship. Fuel would be transferred by pumps and hoses, and be linked together a minimum amount of time. Then the grapples would unfasten and the two ships would part, the War Eagle rising back to operational level.

The fourth man was the guide, bringing the two ships together just as a bombardier was in charge, guiding the ship when it went into the long flat bombing run.

The two ships were coming together. The War Eagle was huge, so huge that

while they were still some distance off Blackhawk almost panicked, thinking they were going to crash, thinking they were far too close. "Look out!"

## Chapter Eleven

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The pilot of the supply ship looked grim, but his hands were steady on the controls. He snapped an order to the man in the bombardier's seat, who began calling back precision orders.

The double line of tiny lights swung around until they were straight ahead, a miniature runway in the sky.

They grew closer. The supply ship increased its speed to match that of the "mother ship" and slowly settled down.

*Clang!* A rasping sound followed, then the ship shuddered as the grapples locked on with a double series of thumps.

The German pilot looked at Blackhawk. "That is it," he said. "I must stay here, keep the engines running ..."

Blackhawk nodded. The pilot had to be left, but made incapable of sounding an alarm. Yet he had to know the invaders were on a mission of destruction. Blackhawk raised a boot and smashed his heel into the radio. Then he spoke again.

"If you keep this flying, you'll live," Blackhawk said. "We'll need you to get us down." The pilot shrugged. Blackhawk did not have much faith in the German's acceptance, but if they moved fast enough—

He heard the hatches opening and the sharp whistle of high altitude air. The bombs were being unloaded. He looked at Hendrickson, who had finished tying up the man in the bombardier's seat with wiring ripped from the apparatus.

The Dutchman gagged the young man and climbed up next to Blackhawk. "Now we go."

They ran quickly back between the tanks of petrol and they checked each other's uniforms. Their disguises were still their best entry to the great airship below.

There was a personnel hatch, which Stanislaus had opened. Blackhawk said, "I think you'd better go watch the pilot. He might get ideas about disengaging and this ship is our way down."

The Pole looked unhappy, but nodded. He hated to be left out of any action, but it was obvious keeping the back door open was vital. He patted his holstered Luger and nodded. •

The ladder down was made of thin aluminum poles and once below the

edge of the supply ship hatch the icy wind tore at their clothes, almost froze their hands, and made talk impossible. The roar of twelve engines made the air a maelstrom of noise as well.

German airmen helped them down into the bomber, looking dubious, and a captain hurried up to them, saluting, but suspicious.

"General Starn on an inspection tour," Blackhawk said to the officer.

"We were expecting no inspection—"

"Exactly!" snapped Hendrickson, adjusting his wind-rumpled topcoat. "If you knew we were coming it would be no inspection!" The officer started to speak, but the "general" rode right over him. "Your name?"

"Uh . . . *Hauptmann* Roth, Herr General!"

"Take us to your commanding officer, Roth, and be quick about it." Hendrickson pointed to a *feldwebel* with a partially unbuttoned tunic. "Get that man's name, Erhardt!" He looked at the German. "Well, man, take us to the commandant!"

"Yes, sir!"

Blackhawk just touched the *feldwebeFs* blouse and shook his head disapprovingly, then followed Hendrickson.

They had entered the top of the ship in a small welllike compartment. To the bow and stern were elevators which took the wooden framework crates of bombs down a full twenty feet to where more airmen placed them on carts and trundled them into position.

Large pipes led down from pumps, taking the gasoline into wing tanks of enormous capacity and into more tank space in the tail. A ladder led down to the floor. The bombs were stored in racks poised over the bomb bay doors and along the sides of the massive fuselage.

Blackhawk was very impressed. It was larger than a submarine by far, easily the biggest aircraft ever built. They followed the nervous captain until they passed a radio compartment where a sergeant was trying to raise the supply ship.

"It's no use, *unterfeldwebel*," he said, shrugging. "The radio went out just as we docked. They're working on it now:"

"Sir!"

A few feet further on Hendrickson paused at a bubble turret, where an airman snapped to attention next to his MP 38 machine gun. "At ease," Hendrickson said, looking out.

Blackhawk moved in close as Hendrickson said, "Look at this, Erhardt." .

They could see the huge black swastika painted on the side, and the immense starboard wing with its four churning engines. Above this were the shorter wings of the supply ship. Hendrickson said to Blackhawk, "Do you have the little bomb ready?" Blackhawk nodded, then checked the sabotage device in his pocket. It was a thermite incendiary bomb, enough to make an explosion that would set off any petrol tank. There was a timer which, once pressed, gave them fifteen minutes.

The German captain waited for them. Hendrickson paused frequently, looking skeptically at this and that, instructing his "aide" to take certain notes.

They came to a branching in the catwalk that had taken them almost the length of the ship. One part went down and forward, the other up a few feet to a compartment door. Hendrickson glanced at Blackhawk. This was not the pilot's compartment. What they had hoped to do was to kill or incapacitate the pilots, then set the thermite bomb in some hidden clink—which Blackhawk had already spotted—and get away in the supply plane.

"We are very high, Captain," Hendrickson said, "but you do not have oxygen masks for the crew."

Roth nodded over his shoulder. "The ship is pressurized for greater comfort. We use some of the heat from the engines to warm us. The bomb bay is sealed off so as not to affect the pressurization in the rest of the ship."

Roth pointed at a red-painted small tank of oxygen, with two masks attached, fastened to the bulkhead. "We have these all through the ship, for emergencies."

"What sort of emergencies?" Blackhawk asked.

Roth made a deprecating gesture. "The British might have some kind of long-range gun we do not know about, though that is doubtful. Or they might get some stripped-' down plane high enough to do some minor damage." He smiled at them over his shoulder. "Just being cautious. The colonel likes to be careful; this is a most important mission. The Fihrer himself gave our colonel the command."

Colonel who? Blackhawk wondered.

"This way," Captain Roth said, knocking on the hatch.

There was a voice from within and the captain opened the door. Hendrickson walked up and stepped through, followed by Blackhawk.

They both stopped, stunned at what they saw. The cabin was quite large, the size of a suburban living room, but it had two large windows on either side, composed of squares of bullet-proof glass, and giving a spectacular view of the night sky above and the dark water below. While cruising high over London, Blackhawk thought, it must be a ring-side seat to an awesome sight, the bombing of the city.

The furniture was harshly modern, in the latest Bauhaus design; lightweight tubes of chromed and bent aluminum, with stark black fabric. There was a wine rack behind a small bar, soft lights, and against the forward bulkhead, a large bed with crimson silk sheets. The room was stark, startling, ultra-modern, and very functional. A color painting of Adolf Hitler was mounted on the wall over the bed. An immense swastika of tubing was on the ceiling.

But the room was not quite as astonishing as the two people in it. He was tall, hawkfaced, with his head shaven. He wore the black uniform of the *SS-Oberschar-fiihrer* and the insignie of an *SS-Sturmfihrer*. In addition, he carried a silver dagger, hung from a silver chain, which indicated he had been a member of the SS before 30 January 1933. He was in his early thirties, trim



and fit, with the arrogant manner of all Prussians and—Blackhawk was beginning to believe—all Germans. He wore a black, red and white swastika armband and the wings of the Luftwaffe, a curiosity on the uniform of the Gestapo.

But it was the other person that caught Blackhawk's eye. She was coldly beautiful, with pale white skin, and straight, coal-black hair which she wore unfashionably long, falling well below her shoulders. Her dress was equally startling, a simple evening frock of crimson silk, cut low over the large, full breasts and following the curves of her voluptuous body like paint.

Her eyes were large and, surprisingly, for a brunette, deep blue. Her mouth was a wide red slash, which curved slightly as she gave the disguised Blackhawk a swift appraisal. She made no move to rise from her languid position in a tube-and-canvas chair as the commanding colonel of the ship almost shouted his "*Heil Hitler!*"

"Heil Hitler," Hendrickson said, looking around with a sniff. "You do well for yourself, *Oberst*." Both Hendrickson and Blackhawk were well aware they did not know the officer's name, something any inspecting general would surely know.

"Yes, sir! I have not left the *Kriegadler Ein* since launch. It is my vow to stay aloft until England surrenders!"

"Admirable," Hendrickson murmured. "Admirable. And who is tins?"

The colonel looked surprised for the first time. "Why, Major Klinemann, Herr General."

Hendrickson realized he had made a mistake and he turned angrily to Blackhawk. "Erhardt, why was I not informed that Major Klinemann was of the female sex?"

Blackhawk looked apologetic. "Sir, I had thought in your briefing with *Reichmarschall* Goering.. ."

"Never mind," Hendrickson snapped. He gave the lounging woman a brisk heel click. "Why are you out of uniform, Major?"

"Herr General," she said, rising gracefully, "I am off duty."

Hendrickson harrumphed and turned to the colonel, whose name he did not yet know. "I do not have much time. I would prefer to return on this flight."

"Herr General, if you were to return to the London area with us you would see a glorious sight this night. We plan to bomb Buckingham Palace. Intelligence sources say that both King George and Queen Mary are there, along with their two daughters. We can strike a great blow tonight, a deep psychological wound to the British mind, sir."

"Yes, Herr General," Major Klinemann said, moving sinuously toward him. "It is a *glorious* sight, the bombs at night." She gave the colonel a languid look. "Positively *arousing*, general. To drink champagne and... to drink and watch the British lion squirm, to hear the explosions .. . ah ..." She smiled seductively. "It makes my blood run hot, general. Colonel Sternbach and I..." She gave the colonel a long look through long lashes and Blackhawk had no

illusions about what they were doing as the bombs exploded below.

"*Nein, fraulein*," Hendrickson said. "I must return this night. Colonel Sternbach, if you would be so good as to have the captain here show me the pilot's compartment, I will complete my examination and return at once."

"Of course, Herr General. Roth..."

"This way, sir."

"*Fraulein... Oberst...*" Hendrickson returned the colonel's salute and the woman's smile. Her smile licked over Blackhawk like a summer shower and he bowed to cover his sudden embarrassment, for he was not used to being so boldly stripped naked by a woman's eyes.

Roth led them down and forward to the pilot's compartment, which, considering the size of the ship, was not much larger than was conventional.

Pilot, co-pilot, bombardier. The radioman had been placed almost amidships to allow for the huge main cabin with its skylights. Blackhawk looked at Hendrickson, then spoke to Roth.

"Thank you, Captain. We can find our way back. Please tell *Oberst* Sternbach that we are almost certain to give *Reichmarschall* Goering a good report."

Roth smiled. "Thank you, sir. General." Hendrickson grunted, apparently intent upon the ship's controls. Roth backed away and left.

Blackhawk spoke quietly to his white-moustached Comrade. "Let us just slip back, drop off our hot-tempered little friend here," he said, tapping his pocket, "and skip out."

Hendrickson looked at him from under his heavy white eyebrows. "And what if it fails to go off? Or is found? Or goes off and they put out the fire? Or it is only damaged?"

Blackhawk looked grim. They'd have to doubly insure the destruction of the Nazi *War Eagle*. But if they disabled the pilots, blocked the passage to the control room, and put the *War Eagle* into a dive they might not be able to properly disengage the supply plane and would die with the Nazi airship.

They only had one thermite detonator and that had been difficult enough to get. Blackhawk nodded. "Here's what we'll do," he said. "We'll take control of the pilots, then you go back and get the supply ship ready to take off. I'll put the ship in a dive, block the entrance some way, then run back and get aboard."

Hendrickson just looked at him. "Through a diving ship? Through a diving ship full of angry Nazis?"

Blackhawk shrugged. "They think we're Nazis, too. I can give conflicting orders." Then he grinned. "I can run pretty fast, too."

Hendrickson shrugged. "I'll keep the supply ship rising. It will keep this monster from going into too much of a dive; then when you get aboard I'll disengage and it will start dropping. Time the bomb to go off just after we disengage."

The two friends looked at each other. The chances were slim for both.

Hendrickson, in his Reich general's -uniform, had a better chance to succeed than Blackhawk, but both knew the Nazi airplane had to be destroyed.

They clasped hands. Hendrickson left the compartment and Blackhawk looked at his watch, calculating how much time it would take to get to the plane and gain control. He added a bit for delays, bits of "inspection," and so on.

The seconds ticked by. The minute hand of the watch crept very slowly across the dial. The co-pilot looked around at Blackhawk, who gave him a rather ghastly smile.

Almost time.

Blackhawk gave Hendrickson an extra twenty seconds. You could do a lot in twenty seconds, he thought. Then he took his Luger from its holster.

"*Achtung!*" he yelled. The startled pilots looked around, their eyes startled as they saw the weapon aimed at them. "All of you—back here!"

He should shoot them, he knew. But somehow he just couldn't, not in cold blood. He didn't really know what he was going to do with them, however.

The bombardier stood up, frowning, nervous and truculent. The co-pilot looked crafty for a second . . . until Blackhawk moved the muzzle so that he could see down the dark barrel. "You!" Blackhawk yelled at the bombardier. "Here! Now! *Schnell!*"

As the wary German moved toward him Blackhawk brought the barrel of the gun down on his temple. The man fell, his groan lost in the roar of the eight huge engines. The co-pilot started forward, but stopped as the gun swung his way again.

"Take his belt," Blackhawk ordered. "Tie him up."

I'm only postponing their deaths, he thought. It would be more merciful to just shoot them now. But he couldn't. For the first time Blackhawk hesitated in killing the hated Nazi.

Don't think about that, his head told him. Do your job. Think of the civilians this monster ship will kill. This Nazi crew knows what this ship does. They're probably volunteers.

He gestured at the fallen bombardier and the co-pilot reluctantly bound him up. He kept glancing at Blackhawk, as if to try and dodge the blow he was certain would come.

The pilot would be last, Blackhawk thought. It suddenly seemed as if there was a lot to watch in that cabin. He told the co-pilot to sit down, which he did, wedging into the cramped space behind his own seat.

Blackhawk took the man's belt and tied his hands over his head to a hydraulic line. Then he turned toward the pilot. This must be quick, he thought. His sense of balance told him the great airplane had taken a slight upward turn. Hendrickson's lifting!

No time for subtleties. He brought the hard steel barrel down on the pilot's head. The man slumped to one side, ripping off his earphones. Blackhawk grabbed the wheel and righted the plane, which had begun a slight turn to the

port.

He looked around, holding the wheel. Then he let go and made a sprint for the narrow cabin door. He'd jam it somehow and then—

He opened the door and looked into the barrel of a machine pistol.

Colonel Sternbach motioned for a man to wedge past Blackhawk as the airman with the pistol took his Luger. The Colonel had a nasty sneer on his thin lips. "Such things are not as easy as you thought, no?" He motioned Blackhawk forward. The adventurer could hear the jabbering of the co-pilot and felt sick.

Caught!

Now the War Eagle would bomb London, perhaps even this night killing the King and Queen, even young Elizabeth, heir to the throne.

He had failed.

Despair overtook Blackhawk, but light on the heels of his devastation came anger. With a roar he slashed out at the airman with the machine pistol, knocking him into the side of the passage. Sternbach clawed at the gun in his holster as Blackhawk dived for the Schmeisser rattling on the metal catwalk.

His fingers closed over the grip and he started to lift the gun.

Something exploded in the back of his head.

Fire, stars, pain.

Then blackness.

*I've failed*, he thought as he slid wetly into the long night.

Pain.

Pain in the head, right next to his mind.

Pain in his wrists.

Pain in his side. Someone had been kicking him.

Opening his eyes was an act of great resolve. He wanted to just slip back into oblivion, away from the pain, away from the knowledge of how badly he had failed.

Everything was a blur, the pain and sight and sounds mixed together. *I've been shot in the head*, he thought. *No, struck. Sternbach hit me.*

He struggled to focus and almost gasped out loud. He was looking into blackness punctuated with explosions. Fires.

He recognized the gleaming bell curve of the Thames ahead, glistening from fires. Antiaircraft guns fired, their shells exploding well below them. Blackhawk's first thought was one of frustration and anger: *Don't they see they can't reach it—and the shrapnel falls back upon the city!*

The second thought was a personal one. Where was he?

He raised a head stabbed through and through with daggers of pain and looked around. He was spread-eagled before the port window in Sternbach's luxurious quarters in the sky. The huge aluminum swastika had been swung down from the ceiling and he was lashed to it.

And below, London lay naked, the Nazi ship on its final bombing run.

He tugged at the lashings, but it was no good, and each tug ripped pain through his head. His hands and feet felt numb.

"Ah ... the bird awakens ..."

The voice was silken, seductive, with an edge of genuine happiness. Blackhawk looked down and to the left.

What he saw was Major Klinemann. And he was seeing almost all of her.

She said nothing, letting him examine her with obvious pride. She wore a bizarre version of the standard uniform: high black boots, custom-made black jodhpurs of a shiny black material, a black silk shirt tailored to her voluptuous body, a black Gestapo cap with silver braid and a skull-and-crossbones over the hard black visor. On her left arm was the standard armband of red, with the black swastika in a circle of white.

Blackhawk smiled slightly. It looked like a high fashion version of the Nazi uniform, and incongruous in the bare functionalism of the great aircraft. But his helplessness was no cause for amusement, and his smile died.

Amusement tugged at the woman's full lips. She cocked an eyebrow at her prisoner. "Blackhawk ..." she said, in a voice that was a caress. "The famous ... infamous ... Blackhawk."

Blackhawk looked her up and down, a bleak expression on his face. "And what are you dressed for, *fraulein*? The Annual Degenerate's Ball of Berlin?"

Her lips compressed into a line of anger only momentarily, then the expression of almost dreamy anticipation returned. "Ah, the famous courage! Insult in the face of death. Grace under pressure." She shook her head. "I have been called worse, *Herr* Blackhawk." Her smile was that of a venomous snake. "But not to my face."

"My men?" he inquired harshly.

She shrugged. "The old one, he is unconscious. Stern-bach shot him. But he will live ... until the last bomb is dropped."

"What do you mean?" he growled.

She smiled and walked around him, trailing her fingers across the back of his legs. He was suspended well off the carpeted floor, and felt very vulnerable. "The bombs come in the wooden crates, which you saw. Like cartridges in a clip. When the last bomb is dropped, we drop the crate as well. It would only slow resupplying down to attempt to re-use them." She walked back in front of him and Blackhawk was unusually aware of her closeness.

"And?" he rasped.

"And your companions—both of them—are tied to the last crate. Heinrich thought it amusing for them to hang there, in the open bomb bay, watching London die, and then to realize and anticipate their own deaths."

"Stanislaus? He's all right?"

She shrugged and put her hand on his thigh, high up toward the hip. "Yes. Somewhat battered, I'm afraid, but quite awake."

"And what are your plans for me, Major?"

"Oh, call me Karla, *bitte*. And what shall I call you, warrior?" She moved her hand and Blackhawk quivered.

"I... Blackhawk! I am *Blackhawk*!"

She raised her brows in amusement. "And you called me theatrical!" She moved very close and he felt her breath on his skin. It was cold in the room.

"What does our Prussian friend think of your... your costume?"

She laughed with genuine amusement. "He loves it, of course! It's... a private uniform. Very few have seen it. You should feel privileged, my brave and foolish friend. Only a very selected few, all of high rank, have ever seen this ... uniform. And a few who are now dead, of course, but they are unimportant."

Outside the wide window Blackhawk could see London slowly approaching. It would not be long.

"Did Hitler like it?" Blackhawk asked.

She stiffened and stepped back, frowning.

"Our glorious leader is above such things!" she cried.

Breathing hard, Karla Klinemann raised her fists. "The Führer—" she stopped herself, panting, her bosom heaving. She fought for control and then an expression of icy calm came over her. She stepped closer, a cold smile on her face. Quite deliberately she began touching him.

## Chapter Twelve

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The black-clad Nazi woman moved back. "See, my dear young man, you are just a man, Blackhawk. You are all alike. You find the proper lures, the correct techniques, the right... um ... atmosphere and men are easy to control. You are such slaves to your glands."

She gestured at the barely-visible landscape below, the approaching fires and moonlit flickers. "Soon you shall be as aroused as I by the godlike destruction we deliver!"

"Sternbach likes it?" the helpless Blackhawk said.

"He *loves* it," she said with a wicked smile. "Death and sex, my dear Blackhawk, death and sex are irresistible."

"He'll be here?" Blackhawk was testing the leather straps that held him prisoner. They seemed unbreakable, even against his powerful body.

Karla Klinemann looked at him sideways. "Why?"

Blackhawk could not manage a shrug. "Well, a man doesn't like too many ... um ... observers."

"What would he observe?" she asked in a low voice.

Blackhawk managed a smile. "Well, it's obvious, isn't it? What you want, that is."

She moved very close and embraced him around the waist. Despite himself Blackhawk found pleasure in her touch. "What I want," she said with her lips against him, "I always *get*... eventually ..."

Blackhawk tensed his whole body, tugging at both the wrist straps until he saw droplets of blood, disguising his efforts as a reaction to her presense.

Then he almost laughed at himself, imagining his breaking of the wrist bonds only to flop over, upside down, still attached at the ankles. No, he would have to get her to release him.

"And you want a mercenary?" he said.

She looked up at him, a frown line between her arched brows. "A mercenary?"

"That's what we are. We fight for whoever pays us the most." He managed the suggestion of a shrug. "The Allies have need of... fighting men who can operate outside the international conventions ..."

"You mean the United States?"

"Well..." He hesitated. "They aren't yet in the war, you know ... but Roosevelt's sympathies *do* he with England and Churchill and ..." He shrugged again, leaving the improbable story to her imagination. After all, nothing was more improbable than a female sadist with a torture chamber and boudoir in the sky.

"You'd fight for whoever paid the most?"

"We prefer fighting for winners, naturally, but... money talks, *fraulein*." He grinned. "And I listen."

She seemed very thoughtful, absently touching him as she stared out at the city ahead. Blackhawk thought he had better shift her mind around a bit. "The Colonel—?"

"Oh, he won't be here. I told him to stay away this time."

"Oh? A major telling a colonel...?\*"

"This colonel may look very formidable, but..." She gestured expressively. "He takes a certain sort of order. He'll not disturb us ... and you have no place to go." She looked up at him thoughtfully. "I have no doubt you are planning something, some way to turn things to your advantage. Perhaps you want to offer your ... unconventional group to the service of the Reich... or perhaps something else. It does not matter. In the end you shall do as I wish."

She turned away, then tossed back her long black hair and said over her shoulder, "Exactly as I wish." She picked up a belt and holster and strapped it on.

Then she walked to a bulkhead full of doors, which Blackhawk had thought were clothes and equipment lockers. She opened one and, as Blackhawk twisted around to look over his shoulder, she pulled from one of the large compartments two pieces of "equipment."

They were busty young blonde girls, bare-footed and bare-legged, wearing

short *chemises* of a pale orchid color. Their full breasts all but fell from the thin coverings. They were blindfolded and had been hung from their tied wrists in the closet. Several red welts showed on the backs of their legs.

Karla Klinemann ordered them to attention, then removed both the blindfolds and the ropes that fastened their wrists. She then ordered them to take Blackhawk down from the swastika of iron tubing..

They rubbed their wrists briskly, but they were quick to obey. Blackhawk's own hands and feet were numb and he could not stand for several moments as the awful pain of returning blood came to him.

Karla Klinemann stood, hand on hip and dangling the leather whip. "You wonder what these women are, don't you?"

Blackhawk just rubbed his hands and tried to think of the next move, the move that wouldn't get him killed.

"They are volunteers, *Herr* Blackhawk. Aren't you?" she snapped.

"Yes!" one said.

"Yes, yes!" the other said immediately.

Klinemann smiled. "Yes, volunteers. You see, they were paroled to me by a... friend in the police, the *Hauptwachmeister der Schutzpolizei der Gendarmerie*. They had the option of a bit of service with me, or... prison. Being basically of obedient natures, they chose service with me. Didn't you, my pigeons?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Of course, *Fraulein* Klinemann."

"Sternbach has permitted them aboard as part of the civilian staff." She laughed a wicked laugh. "They are most amusing as they perform their ... duties."

Slaves, Blackhawk thought, scared young slaves. Anything would seem better than a Nazi prison, where no doubt they would be just as abused, if not more so.

"Look out there, Blackhawk! London! Helpless! The bombing will start in moments!" She strode to the port window and stared with glittering eyes at the city far below. "This will be a glorious night! A real blow for the greater glory of Germany!"

She was almost panting as she turned to Blackhawk. "And you, you will do your part, my courageous mercenary! You will see and feel the glory of serving our Leader!"

Blackhawk had no doubt about what his "service" was intended to be. He had no intention of "doing his part," but he had to play along. His head hurt, his feet and hands were on fire, and he was unarmed. However, he was still alive.

"Come to me!" Klinemann ordered. The two scared-eyed blondes helped him up and guided him to where the female Nazi stood at the railing by the great window, looking out. "Look, Blackhawk!" she said, grabbing his arm and pulling him to her side. The holstered pistol dug into his thigh.



"The first bombs—look!" They looked back and saw the double string of explosions rippling across London. The flash, the shock wave thrusting through the night, the fires. In the flicker of burning buildings Blackhawk saw the toppling of walls.

He gritted his teeth to hide his anger from her, but she was too wrapped up in the sight. Death and destruction were obviously erotic to her. She took his hands without even looking and placed them on her. The two blondes crowded in, caressing them both in what was obviously Standard Operating Procedure. Blackhawk felt trapped and hemmed in.

The gun was against his thigh. He had only to pull the flap loose on the holster—something she was almost certain to feel—or to do something else.

"I don't need these others," he said, pushing the blondes back to give himself some room. He began to caress the ripe curves of the Nazi sadist, his hands moving swiftly from here to there. She murmured and pressed against him, her eyes on the sight below.

Another string of bombs fell, exploding across the city of Nelson and Shakespeare, Elizabeth and Bacon, the city of great kings and warriors, of writers and artists.

Blackhawk's fist collided with her jaw and the bizarrely costumed Klinemann tumbled back, fell into the startled arms of one of the blondes, and then collapsed to the floor. Blackhawk fumbled at her holster and yanked out the Walther P38 he found there. He pointed the gun at the blondes.

"Am I going to have trouble with you?" Their big eyes and quick shakes told him what he wanted to know.. "Look, if I can, I'll try to save you. Is there anything you can put on except... uh ... those things?"

They stared at him, then at the unconscious Karla Klinemann. They hurried to one of the wall lockers and extracted khaki uniforms without insignia. Blackhawk kept an eye on Klinemann until he found his own Blackhawk uniform and climbed into it.

Then he dragged the limp Nazi over to the compartment in which the two blondes had been confined and tied her wrists. He gagged her and hung her like a side of beef and closed the doors.

To the blondes he said, "What are your names?"

"Olga and Oona," **one** of them said. "I'm Olga. We're sisters."

"All right, here's what we do. We've got to stop the bombing and.I must try to save my men as well. But the bombing comes first. Do you think you could shoot a man?"

"A Nazi?" Oona asked and Blackhawk nodded. "Then yes." Olga nodded as well.

Blackhawk checked his own weapon in its holster, then handed them Klinemann's P38. "Come with me."

He herded them out the door and once again they started for the control cabin. Blackhawk peered around the last turning in the passage to see a guard holding a Schmeisser outside the door. He pulled the women back and told

them what to do. They looked scared, then nodded. Both of them unbuttoned several buttons **on** their khaki blouses and stepped out into the passage, giggling and pushing at one another, seemingly very drunk.

The guard went on immediate alert, aiming his weapon at them. They feigned great horror, then laughed and approached the guard smiling. "Ah, Otto! Otto! The great Major Klinemann requests the pleasure of our noble pilot in the main cabin!"

"*Hauptmann* Kelheim is on duty! We are bombing London!" He looked shocked, but the two blondes had a good answer.

"Exactly! You know how *she* is! Tonight is *the* one which has brought us here!" Olga laughed and embraced her sister and they staggered. "Ohh!" they both said, and with great slowness, fell all over the guard, pulling down on his gun.

Blackhawk moved swiftly, racing down the catwalk and punching the guard in the face with all his might. He ripped the machine gun from his grasp and shoved through the hatchway. He didn't even hesitate, but started machine-gunning everything in sight—pilots, equipment, the glass canopy.

The shattered glass cascaded over them all, bringing in the icy cold and causing a great outflowing of air. The ship started to slip to the side. Blackhawk jumped back out, slammed the door against the outflowing air and shoved at the women. "Move!"

They stared, then started running after him. They were committed now. Nothing could save the ship; the controls were smashed, Blackhawk now had to save himself and his men ... and Olga and Oona.

The ship tilted dangerously, curving back in a flat turn toward the English Channel to the east. Alarms went off. Blackhawk used the last three rounds in the machine gun to kill one of the airmen rushing at him. Then he pulled the two blondes into the radio room. He put a gun at the head of the startled German and told him to broadcast the words "The Eagle falls," on the emergency frequency. Once he had done that Blackhawk used the man's own Luger to destroy the radio.

The sergeant started to jump him, but Oona tripped him and Blackhawk knocked him out. They heard a lot of footsteps pounding past the closed door, then he ran out, a gun in each hand. He pointed at the ladder up to the supply ship and ordered the two blondes up. A *feldwebel* appeared, gun in hand, and got a bullet in the chest. Blackhawk raced back along the ship, between the fuel tanks and through the hatch into the unpressurized bomb bay.

The racks were mostly empty, and as he looked to the starboard' another string of bombs dropped. Seconds later the next port rack was released, falling into the dark. The wooden crates went, caught the wind as they fell through the massive open bomb bay, and twisted and tumbled into the night.

There were two more sets to go and then the last "clip" of bombs. An aircrew, wearing oxygen masks, were busy getting ready to deliver the next

load. The fact that the ship was tilted did not seem to bother them. There was still clearance. Blackhawk assumed they thought of it as some evasive maneuver.

A bullet pinged off the combing of the hatch and Blackhawk saw a sergeant with a Luger take another aim. He fired, instinctively, wounding the non-com. The man fell, struggled to turn over, then collapsed. Blackhawk began to run around the railed catwalk that fringed the immense bomb bay. A burst of fire from a machine pistol punched holes through the thin metal siding of the ship just ahead of him and Blackhawk jumped back. He fired at a soldier seen through the hanging crates of bombs. His bullet struck the Nazi in the face and he was flung back, hit a crate and toppled forward, over the railing and through the bomb bay.

*Blam!* There was another pistol shot, closer to him, and Blackhawk felt the burn of a bullet across his bicep. The pain made him involuntarily open his hand, and his Luger fell to the catwalk. He bent to retrieve it through a haze of pain. Bullets from a machine pistol tore a hole through the fuselage where his head had been a second before.

Blackhawk threw himself to the catwalk and returned the fire with his retrieved Luger. He had to be careful not to hit any of the bombs, yet the Germans could fire in his direction with impunity. The marksman dodged back and Blackhawk started crawling. The very thin air was getting to him and his lungs labored. Spots of blackness swam across his vision.

He saw a small tank of oxygen with the two dangling masks and reached up for it, but another burst of machine gun fire punched through the bulkhead. The regulator on the tank was shot away and the compressed air inside hissed out in a violent stream. Blackhawk fought against the blackness and his lungs heaved.

He pulled himself along the catwalk, then gathered his legs under him. He fired twice in the direction of the last airman and jumped up, racing along the catwalk to the next small oxygen tank.

The blackness was closing in. There was little air at this altitude. He reached for the tank but the ship tilted to the port suddenly and he was thrown back. The darkness surged in over him and he sagged.

He regained his feet with an effort. The ship was almost at 45 degrees and the catwalk was a slippery obstacle. He threw himself toward the tank and ripped it from the wall. He fell back against the railing and almost went through.

Blackhawk turned the valve with a great effort and put the mask to his face. The life-giving oxygen flooded into his nose and mouth and he breathed deeply. The darkness crept back and he heard the sniping of pistol fire.

Holes appeared in the ship's skin not far from him and he moved along, behind some winching gear, dragging the tank. He took several deep breaths, but knew he could not take the clumsy tank with him. The airmen all had harnesses on their backs into which the tanks fitted, but he didn't have a

harness. His hands had to be free.

He breathed deeply, then threw the tank along the catwalk. A burst of fire struck it and the tank exploded. Shards of steel flew in every direction, ripping open a hole in the ship and knocking Blackhawk down.

He got to his feet, bleeding from his arm and side, and ran down the catwalk to where it was ripped apart.. He vaulted the gap, and was almost pulled out through the gaping hole in the side. But he regained his balance on the sloping deck and looked for Hendrickson and Stanislaus.

Who he found was Colonel Sternbach with a machine gun.

The sneer on the Nazi's face enraged Blackhawk. But the German had the advantage. "You have destroyed the *War Eagle, schwein*, but the Third Reich shall have the last laugh!" He thrust the deadly muzzle of the gun closer to Blackhawk's face. "You ruined the controls, but there is just enough control left to guide us to a selected spot!"

His teeth gleamed in a wolfish smile. "We will all die, Blackhawk, because I have allowed no parachutes on board! And we will take something important with us..." He inflated his chest, and grabbed at the field telephone which was hung on a stanchion.

"Watzmann! Answer me, Watzmann!" His face brightened, but the gun did not waver. "Ah! You know we die this night, Watzmann? Ja! For the Fatherland! For the glory of the Reich! Heil Hitler!"

He waited a moment, listening with a madman's gleam. "This is my final order, *Hauptmann* Watzmann! You are to steer this plane into Buckingham Palace!" The skin of his face was tight, his eyes bulging. "Jawohl! Heil Hitler!"

Sternbach glared at Blackhawk. "You have killed me, my stupid friend, but you will have aided in giving my name to *history*! In the thousand years of the Reich they shall honor my name!" He narrowed his eyes and stared fiercely at Blackhawk. "If I had time I'd lash you to the nose so that you could be the first to enter the Palace, but I don't."

Then he stuck the machine gun closer and pulled the trigger.

But Blackhawk had been anticipating being shot and his hand slapped at the barrel. Five rounds ripped through the skin of the ship inches from his head and then the gun clicked empty.

Sternbach swung the weapon viciously at Blackhawk's head, but missed as the great ship leveled off somewhat. The colonel threw the gun at the prone figure and started running back along the catwalk. "I will have that last glorious moment!" he screamed over the noise of the wind screaming past the bomb bay. "With the Lady of the Dark Night!"

The gun had hit Blackhawk's head, causing more waves of pain to half-blind him. He pulled himself erect, looking through the bomb bay. They were still some distance up, still above the upper range of the fighters, but going down in a steep dive.

Blackhawk yanked an oxygen tank from a wall clip and took a deep breath to clear his head. Then he moved toward the rearmost rack of bombs and saw Hendrickson and Stanislaus tied to the wooden framing with ropes. Hendrickson's head was down; he was either dead or unconscious.

Stanislaus was not much better. Blackhawk climbed over the railing and stuck a mask to the Pole's face. The ■ man revived as Blackhawk tugged at the ropes with frozen fingers. Stanislaus pushed away the mask. "Give some to the Dutchman!" Blackhawk leaned around the wooden crate, not looking down at the nearly two miles of nothingness between him and some London street. He put the mask around Hendrickson's head, but the big white-haired Dutchman did not respond.

Then the next-to-last string of bombs dropped.

"Jam the release!" Stanislaus yelled. "Never mind the ropes! Over there! That thing there!"

Blackhawk saw where the imprisoned man was pointing with his head and nodded. He climbed back over the raffing and stepped along the slanting catwalk to the release mechanism.

Every "clip" of bombs had its own release, electrically activated from the bombardier's post. The clip that had just dropped may have gone accidentally, as Blackhawk distinctly remembered his bullets smashing the cluster of black boxes he had identified as the bomb release mechanism.

He looked around, saw the Schmeisser dropped by the airman he had toppled into the night. He snatched it up and jammed it into the release.

A fraction of a second later the release operated. The restraining hook started to open, the chain slipped, the bombs a quarter-inch from being let go.

And the hook jammed on the hardened steel of the gun.

The barrel bent, but it held.

Blackhawk swayed, the pain in his head like a raging fire. He started to climb back over the railing to release his men, but Stanislaus yelled at him. "*No! Stop the Nazis! Never mind us! Dump this ship in the Channel, the Thames, anything!*"

Blackhawk hesitated, fighting the loyalty to his friends. But he saw there was no time. The bomb release could free itself, the jamming gun slip, but that was not as important as preventing the gigantic ship from ramming into the Palace. The loss of life would be tragic, but the psychological damage to the nation would be tremendous. Blackhawk started toward the control room along the slanting catwalk.

Stanislaus may die without enough air ... the bomb release might work free ... he might pass out... one of the crew might kill him ...

Blackhawk pressed on. He had no weapon except his mind. Even his body was almost out of ammunition, for his responses were slow and erratic. The repeated blows on the head had disoriented him. For a dizzy moment he clung to the catwalk railing over bomb bay, fighting the blots of approaching

blackness.

Then he half-ran toward the hatch out of the bomb bay. It was not locked and he almost fell through, sucking in lungfuls of air in the pressurized compartment.

This brought back some of his coordination and he stalled down the passage. An airman with a bloody head leaped at Blackhawk from a doorway, but Blackhawk strongarmed him in the face and he fell back into the cabin with a groan. The wounded man in black leather saw a Luger in the airman's holster and pulled it out to check the clip.

Four rounds.

He jammed it back into the grip and pumped the gun to put one in the chamber. Then he started toward the prow of the great airship again.

He slipped twice on the slanting deck. Once he fell and hit his head and almost passed out, but he grimly pushed himself up and continued on.

There was a guard at the control room door, armed with a machine pistol. He was young and nervous and fired at Blackhawk in a long hot burst of fire.

No, you fool, Blackhawk thought automatically. You'll burn out the gun that way! Fire in short bursts. Save ammunition and the barrel. It'll heat up and distort.

Then he grinned bitterly to himself. Giving lessons to Nazi killers was not what he wanted to do just then. But he knew he was slow and could get himself killed trying to outwit the young airman. Blackhawk looked at the overhead. This was Sternbach's luxurious quarters. He must have a way directly down into the control room, he thought.

Blackhawk went back along the passage and up the aluminum steps to the door to the bizarre room with its broad vistas of the sky. He didn't have time for subtlety.

The door was unlocked. Blackhawk stepped in, Luger at the ready.

Karla had been released from the closet, but her wrists had not been untied. Her Gestapo cap lay on the deck, along with most of her silk uniform. She still wore her high black boots and armband, but nothing else. Sternbach had her bent over the lower part of the swastika of tubing, swung down from the ceiling, her wrists tied to the railing running in front of the port window.

Sternbach stood behind her, staring down into the city so rapidly approaching. Blackhawk blinked, seeing how low they were. There was a flash of stuttering light and a line of holes was stitched across the window, sending shards of glass blasting into the room.

The nightfighters were after them.

Blackhawk looked around for another exit, one that would lead to the pilot's compartment. To hell with Sternbach and his Armageddon fantasies, he thought.

Blackhawk started for the forward bulkhead, but Sternbach saw him. Perhaps it was a reflection in the window, perhaps it was animal instinct, but the Nazi colonel turned, clawing at the gun in his holster. Blackhawk dived

for the cover of the couch and fired at the Nazi, but missed.

He tried to squirm past, but a round narrowly missed his head. He got to his knees and sat up suddenly, firing at the black-uniformed figure. Sternbach was hit, but his grip on the rounded hip of the captive Karla prevented his falling.

Blackhawk fired again, but the War Eagle lurched and his shot went wild. One more round. Sternbach fired again, his bullet searing along Blackhawk's side. He winced in pain and his fourth and last shot missed.

Stembach laughed. It was a madman's laugh.

## Chapter Thirteen

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Somewhere out there, Blackhawk thought, were the nightfighters trying desperately to down the huge ship. Operating at the top of their operational limit, they were firing again and again. But the *War Eagle* was too big, too invulnerable. The machine gun bullets were ant bites to an elephant.

The *War Eagle* was like a rock dropping toward Buckingham Palace. Only something very powerful could deflect it. And there was nothing that powerful.

Sternbach shouted at Blackhawk. "We die together, *schweinhund*! You and I and the beautiful Karla! Isn't that right, my little poison flower? Speak to me, you—!" He growled at Karla and Blackhawk risked a quick peek.

Sternbach had her by the hair, bending her head back, bending her spine against the bindings of the rope. Her face was contorted in pain and anger. "You worm!" she screamed at him. "You pitiful little tyrant! You think to revenge yourself on me?" She laughed harshly. "I am *still* your master, you strutting *worm*!"

Sternbach struck the back of her head and for a moment she sagged, but then she lifted her head and cursed him. "You think I came aboard this ship for *you*? Never! *Reichleader* Himmler *himself* gave me the assignment! I was your watchdog, you pig!"

Sternbach cursed and started beating at her. Blackhawk got to his feet and charged. He hit Sternbach with a flying block, and the Nazi fell with a groan. He fired at Blackhawk but his aim was bad and Blackhawk punched him in the gut.

The two men clawed their way to their feet, but the Nazi was hampered by his slipping trousers. He brought his handgun up and fired, the bullet plucking at Blackhawk's jodhpurs. Blackhawk struck him as hard as he could.

Stembach was knocked over the railing and through the window.

The cold night air screamed in. Bits of glass were sent like flying daggers

through the room. Blackhawk slipped and fell. Karla yelled something at him but he couldn't hear and didn't care.

He staggered to the forward wall, opened a hatch door to find it was a small bathroom. Snarling, he slammed it closed and reached for another. The ship bumped and swayed and Blackhawk heard the first blasts of the antiaircraft artillery. He pulled open another door and found a spiral staircase down.

There was no time for caution. Blackhawk went quickly down the steps. At the bottom another thin aluminum hatchway opened into the chaos of the control room.

Machine gun bullets had blasted away even more of the glass canopy than Blackhawk had. There was a fire on the starboard side, sputtering in some electrical wiring. The bodies of the men Blackhawk had shot were all in their places, except for the pilot, who lay in the aisle. In the pilot's seat was the man Blackhawk assumed had been Watzmann, the one given the suicide order.

But the nightfighters had gotten to him first. Blackhawk pulled the bloody remains from the seat and sat down in the pool of blood. He looked at the controls in dismay. He had done too good a job. There was very little left in the way of controls.

Then his eyes lit on the unharmed box that held the grapples of the supply plane. They were still engaged and locked. The supply plane had been a prisoner during the Whole flight and Blackhawk thought of Oona and Olga. He flipped the switch that released the grapples and at once felt the ship rise as the weight of the supply plane left them.

Blackhawk looked ahead, into the eye-watering wind from the shattered canopy. *How did they know where the Palace was?* The city was in blackout, with only the bell-curved glitter of the Thames to give even a rough orientation.

Then Blackhawk noticed a small box fastened high on the wall. A series of lights was blinking. Some kind of detection device, following the signal from an espionage agent below! Quickly, Blackhawk tested the controls.

He had only a slight left and right control. He could not bank, only make flat turns. He did what he could, taking the ship off a collision course with Buckingham Palace and back towards the North Sea. They were still in a steep dive. He saw a nightfighter zoom past Mm from below, but had not heard any guns. In the noise from the engines and the whistling of air he could hear very little.

They'd go down in the sea. They'd all die, but the great bomber would be no more. There was a grim satisfaction in that and Blackhawk was adjusting himself to the prospect of death when he felt a cold gun barrel at his neck.

Slowly he turned his head. Karla Klinemann stood there, the goosebumps standing out on her naked body. She wore only two things—her boots and a fierce expression. She said something but Blackhawk couldn't make it out.

She pressed the gun to his neck even harder and leaned closer. "—land—in



a field—awk! Take—down into—a field—south—London—Tunbridge Wells ... an-terbury—omewhere in East Sussex—"

Blackhawk nodded slowly, looking for an opening. But the savage-faced brunette was giving him no chance.

The leader of the Blackhawks had no desire to die, nor to kill his two trapped men. He knew the *War Eagle* would never make it to Germany, and so did Karla Kline-mann. The crash might kill them, there was no doubt about that. To go down in the North Sea or the Channel *was* certain death. The prodding of the gun made up his mind for him. Tugging at the ruined controls he leveled the ship just slightly. London was already slipping away beneath them. The occupants of Buckingham Palace would live this night. Surrey was directly south, a wide flat country just before Sussex.

Another fighter shot by, guns blazing, and Blackhawk prayed they would not hit the remaining bombs. Or his men. Or him, for that matter.

He thought about the procedures of a crash landing. The plane was just too shot up to make any ordinary sort of landing. He wasn't even certain the wheels would go down.

He stole a look around at Klinemann. She was hugging herself, her nipples hard and erect against the cold. Black-hawk had to admire her. She was a formidable opponent. He pointed at the tunic of the dead Watzmann and hugged himself. She glared at him and very carefully tugged the dead body back out of reach.

When Blackhawk looked around again she was wearing the gray Luftwaffe tunic, apparently not minding the blood. Her face looked pinched with cold and her hand trembled as she aimed the Walther P38 at him. She said something and again Blackhawk shrugged. It was just too noisy there.

She carefully moved forward, holding on to equipment, until the gun again pressed against him. In his ear she yelled, "Will—die?"

*Will we die?*

He nodded and shrugged. "Possibly," he shouted. He pointed at the co-pilot's seat, where another bloody body lay crumpled. "Sit there and strap yourself in!" She looked at him quizzically and he repeated it. She nodded and with surprising strength pulled the dead co-pilot out of the seat and unceremoniously toppled him into the lower section, onto the dead bombardier. Then she sat down. The tunic gaped open and Blackhawk again saw her magnificent young body.

What a waste, he thought. If she survives, what will she do? Be a prisoner of war; but if the Germans won, as they confidently expected to, she would emerge a heroine. With her looks and whip and intimate knowledge of the dark secrets of men she'd do well.

But what if England wins—though at that moment Blackhawk had to realistically consider it had a very poor chance—what then? He gave her a sideways look and found her staring at him intently. He raised his eyebrows and she leaned toward him, the gun pointed steadily at him.

"You wonder, don't you?" she shouted. "If we live, what then?" She smiled knowingly. "In England, Blackhawk, there are men who will throw themselves at me! Powerful men!" She leaned closer. "They are in every country, Blackhawk! In every time! Men who would be dominated! By day they rule the world—by night they want to be ruled!" Her smile transformed into a leer. "By me, Blackhawk, ruled by me!"

She sat back, smug and aloof. That she was right, Blackhawk did not doubt. She could not be permitted to win, that was all. She was a beautiful woman, but she was a Nazi. She was evil.

The nightfighters still buzzed at them. The *War Eagle* was dropping down further and further into their operational zone and they struck at the great ship like angry hornets.

Blackhawk had no radio to warn them off, and with the fragilely-held bombs aboard they were almost certain to die on landing. He had to release his men—and to do that he had to overcome Karla Klinemann.

He started slapping at a blinking instrument before him. The dial was useless but he hoped Karla was no flyer. He shouted at her and rapped the dial, leaning close. His words to her were deliberately incoherent, with only a few words in the clear.

". . . down . . . ishart . . . floombus . . . carburetor . . . not.. .glochus . . . won't..." He hit it again, letting an expression of terror cross his face.

"What?" she shouted, leaning closer. He pointed at the dial and again shouted frantically. "*What?*" she said, leaning closer.

For the second time Blackhawk's fist slammed into her jaw and she fell back. The gun dropped from her hand and she slumped, the bloody tunic flapping open in the wind.

Blackhawk was not certain the ship would stay on any sort of course without his holding the controls, but he used the belt from one of the bodies to make a crude strap, holding the wheel more or less in position.

Then Blackhawk started to run toward the rear of the ship. A burst of machine gun fire ripped through the fuselage as he started running along the catwalk. He kept running, thinking it would be very ironic to be killed by the British at this point..

He ran recklessly along, every step a pounding blow to his head. The *War Eagle* was torn with bullet holes, but none had struck the fuel tanks. He grabbed an air tank from the wall as he went into the open bomb bay.

The last "clip" of bombs was still there. Blackhawk saw a shape whiz by just below him, another nightfighter getting into position. He ran to the rear of the bay and saw Stanislaus slumped against the ropes, unconscious. Blackhawk looked at the machine gun barrel jammed into the release mechanism and saw it was bent even further, much closer to giving way.

The Blackhawk leader climbed over to the crate, trying not to put his weight upon it. He put the mask to Stanislaus' mouth and it was a long minute

before the man revived.

Seconds ticked by.

A fighter made another pass at them, stinging bullets into the port wing, where the number one motor caught fire.

Anti-aircraft guns started firing, part of the batteries south of London toward France and the expected invasion route.

Stanislaus almost fell as Blackhawk unknotted the last of his bonds, the rope cold and stiff. He helped the Polish pilot to the catwalk, took a deep breath from the air tank, and went back for Hendrickson. The big Dutchman was unconscious and it was all Blackhawk and Stanislaus could do to get him to safety.

The ship rocked with another burst of anti-aircraft fire and the bomb release snapped open, the jamming gun, the bombs and the wooden crate plunging into the night.

The *War Eagle* slanted to the left, the port wing dipping. Blackhawk pointed toward the front of the ship and Stanislaus nodded, reaching down to lift up the limp Hendrickson.

Once again Blackhawk raced back through the bullet-ridden ship. He stopped at the hatch to the pilot's compartment. Karla Klinemann was gone.

Blackhawk thought a moment. Neither she nor Sternbach were fools. They knew there was always the possibility that the *War Eagle* could be shot down, or even sabotaged. They would have an escape planned. They may have forbidden parachutes to the crew, trapping them high in the sky and condemning them to work to keep themselves there. But neither of the two Nazis were that dumb.

Yet Sternbach had seemed determined to go down with the ship. Then it was Karla who had the escape route.

A parachute.

They were low enough now that they could breathe more or less normally. Low enough to jump.

A beautiful nude woman with an inventive story could gain shelter from some gullible gentleman in Surrey or Sussex, then make her way to the German secret agents in London. She would use her voluptuous body and vicious mind to gain protection, to get away.

Blackhawk turned with a snarl. *No!* She must not escape!

The luxurious quarters! Their special place!

Blackhawk turned and ran up the spiral staircase. The *War Eagle* tilted further, almost into a slip. It did not have long to live. None of them did.

Karla was buckling a parachute over her nude body. Even the German boots were gone. A nude woman had no national identity. There was no uniform to hide, nothing to betray her. Her nudity was a weapon, a resource. Any man would hesitate to destroy such lush perfection.

She snapped closed the last buckle as Blackhawk burst through the door.

She saw him coming at her and twisted to dive through the shattered port window. But Blackhawk knocked her down and for a few seconds they wrestled, the man in black leather and the nude brunette in the canvas harness.

Blackhawk had no compunctions about hitting a woman with his balled fist. She was the enslaver of Oona and Olga, the sadist, the probable killer of many. He struck her hard in the stomach, then sent a vicious hook to her jaw. She went limp, sprawling out obscenely beneath him.

When he got up he had to grab at the big swastika of tubing to prevent skidding across the floor. Already the furniture had ripped loose from its moorings and had crashed against the port railing.

Stanislaus burst through the door, holding up a dazed but semi-conscious Hendrickson. The wound in his upper chest was still oozing blood. Blackhawk pointed at the parachute on Karla. "Get that on him," he shouted. Then he began looking for more chutes.

He found one in a compartment hidden behind Karla's small closet of uniforms and rather bizarre costumes.

Two parachutes, three men.

He thrust the chute at Stanislaus. "Get into this!"

"But—!"

"That's an order!" He helped the Polish flyer into the parachute, then they both grasped the railing as antiaircraft fire shook the ship. Blackhawk lifted the dazed Hendrickson into Stanislaus' arms. "Jump with him! Pull his ripcord for him!"

Stanislaus nodded, his eyes filled with pain. They both lifted the Dutchman, buffeted by the wind, and then the Pole leaped, pulling Hendrickson with him.

In a second they were gone. Blackhawk stared after them. He felt like saluting, but it seemed too theatrical. The ship lurched under another barrage and he saw the starboard wing catch fire. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Karla slip out the hatch.

Blackhawk smiled grimly as he fought his way back down to the control compartment. Both wings on fire, antiaircraft guns getting the range, the controls shot away, a beautiful but deadly Nazi running naked through the ship, a crash landing at night his only way out.

He climbed into the bloody pilot's seat once again. The aircraft was difficult to straighten out but he did. He judged the distance to the ground by the flashes of the guns below. Another set of bursts bracketed the front of the aircraft and more of the glass canopy was shot away. Blackhawk suffered a gash on his cheek.

Well, he thought, I hope the Blackhawks go on without me. Take the war to the bastards, he growled to himself.

The gunflashes were closer.

It would not be long.

The dark landscape came up fast. He had the impression of a glittering ribbon that must be a stream or river. Twenty miles or so to the southeast was

Hastings. 1066 and all that. Brighton was directly south, the flashy resort with its fantasy pavillion built by the Regent.

And below was the night-shrouded landscape of East Sussex. There were a thousand things down there that could kill him—hills, stone houses, copses of trees, gul-leys, all in the dark.

The *War Eagle* shuddered. *It's falling apart*, he thought. He hoped for the usual good German design and manufacturing skills. *Hold together*, he prayed. *Just a few moments more*.

The countryside came up toward him fast. He skimmed over a line of trees, the plane quivering. Then he saw a tree go by—at his height.

There was a splintering crash and the huge ship whipped to the left, metal screaming. There was an explosion in the rear, a grinding, relentless screech of metal. Something fell on him and Blackhawk was knocked unconscious.

It was the sound of crackling flames that woke him. And the stench of spilled oil and burning flesh.

Blackhawk lifted his head, shouldering aside the flight equipment that had fallen on his back. His head pounded and there was blood on his face. He wiped a sleeve across his forehead and flung the droplets of blood to the deck.

His back was hot and he looked around to see through the broken hatch the flames filling the interior of the ship near the massive fuel tanks.

He started to get up and the tanks in the port wing exploded, knocking him out of the seat. Unconsciousness came briefly, then he fought back up. There was no way out through the ship. He'd have to go out through the broken glass canopy.

Gingerly, Blackhawk climbed over the edge, cutting himself several times. He hung on to the window edge. The burning remains of the port wing gave him enough light to see the ground. He let go and fell.

He didn't even remember becoming unconscious; he just awoke lying on the ground, his head pounding. The aircraft was afire from the wings back.

Blackhawk knew he had to get away. The main fuel tanks were the next to go. He staggered to his feet, swayed and almost fell. Many things hurt, but mostly his head. He stumbled away from the wreck, the flames casting his shadow ahead.

There was an explosion and a great hand slapped him off his feet and hurtled him into the dark.

When he came to again he found his face in the dirt. He groaned and felt his head. It felt bloody and about the size of a watermelon. He carefully rolled over and sat up, looking back at the crashed *War Eagle*. His vision was blurred but he saw the metal struts dark against the flames, the skeleton of the ship roasting hotly.

Something moved, dark against the fire.

Something human.

Someone naked, the flames reddening her smooth flesh.

Karla Klinemann.

A Gestapo dagger glinted in the firelight.

She stood on spread legs, swaying. Blackhawk 'blinked to clear his vision. There was blood on her pale skin, but it could have been the blood from Watzmann's tunic.

He could not see her face but he heard her voice above the flames. "You'll die, Blackhawk. I swear it. By Siegfried and Wotan, I swear it!"

She took a few steps toward him and stopped. She was weak and wounded, but she was on her feet and she had a dagger.

"Give up," Blackhawk croaked, his throat dry. "You're in England ..."

"Then England will be your grave," she said huskily, taking a few more steps toward him.

Blackhawk pressed against the rocky ground, trying to get himself up, but the pain in his skull almost blacked him out. He moved slowly, carefully, gathering himself. Karla took two more steps.

"Oh, Blackhawk," she gasped. "If you had been born German!" She clenched her fist around the ornate dagger with its enameled swastika. "If we had only met differently ... you and I... together, we ..." She stopped, her face hardening.

"But that is not the way it was! You are my enemy and now I shall drink your blood!" She lifted the dagger and threw herself at him. Blackhawk rolled, striking weakly at her. His coordination was slow and flawed.

It was like slow motion to his injured brain.

The blood-streaked voluptuary twisting ... the dagger rising... the flames licking into the sky behind her...

The dagger plunged ... he rolled, twisted ... the knife went into the soil, knocking sparks off a rock... her snarling face ... the long black hair, matted with blood ...

He struck at her again, his fist thudding into her bosom ... she gasped and slashed at him ... the knife tugged at the leather of his jacket... the knife was raised again, plunging down...

The point slashed at the hawk symbol on his chest... the blade twisted, slicing through the leather, bending ...

He grabbed at her ... she rolled on top of him, screaming... then she went stiff... A gaping red mouth. Staring eyes. Then she went limp. The dagger, twisted, had gone into her side.

Blackhawk lay there for a long moment, looking over her bare shoulder at the flicker of flames. He winced as another fuel tank exploded, sending gobs of fire into the sky. Then he shoved her off. Karla slid limply to the ground and lay on her side, her face empty of all expression.

Blackhawk sat up, his mind tenaciously grasping at survival. He must get away. The British would be here soon, attracted by the column of smoke and fire. They must not find him, the outlaw flyer. He got wearily to his feet.

Hendrickson and Stanislaus were back that way somewhere. He had no hope of finding them, but it was a direction.

He saw hooded headlights coming along a road to the east and he walked out of the firelight.

Behind him the fire put a crimson glow across the motionless nude body with the Gestapo dagger in it.

## Chapter Fourteen

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3 June 1940

German forces had swept across France. The British and French armies had fallen back to Dunkirk, where the biggest evacuation in history was under way. Over a quarter million troops, about a third of them French, had gotten away to the island fortress of Great Britain. But they were without tanks', rifles or equipment. The Royal Navy had lost many ships. The decisive air battle, to be called the Battle of Britain, raged increasingly. Winston Churchill, on this day, was writing a speech about never surrendering, a heroic speech about fighting on the beaches. The evacuation of the last Allied Forces from Normandy had begun. The Germans would take Dunkirk within 24 hours. The Nazi supply plane which had carried the Blackhawks up to the *War Eagle*, with Olga and Oona aboard, had suffered damage, and made a forced landing in Essex. Stanislaus had helped the wounded Hendrickson out of his parachute and they had gone into hiding, stolen clothing, and worked their way north to return to Blackhawk Island.

The mood was grim. The Second World War had reached its worst point yet. It looked as though England would be invaded at any moment. Great stretches of France were falling to the Germans and Paris was expected to fall within a week. The Panzer divisions were rushing to the sea. The United States still had not entered the war, despite repeated pleas. The Battle of Britain was about to begin.

"We have only a few options," Blackhawk said to his friends. He looked at Hendrickson, weak but insistent that he was able to fly. Blackhawk's own wounds were mostly healed. "We can cease being Blackhawks and join the appropriate air services." There were several groans and Andre<sup>1</sup> said, "*Bon ami*, we would be lost in the— what do you call it?"

"Red tape," Chuck said in his Texas twang. "He's right, Frenchy's right. They do it all by the book..."

"So we have other options," Blackhawk said. "We can continue to operate as we have, unconventionally against the Nazi." His men nodded and murmured assent. "Or..." he said, and they looked at him.

"Or we can go after very specific targets. Very *important* targets. Andre, what will be Hitler's next move?"

The Frenchman shrugged. "Consolidate his gains in France ... then invade England. Strike before they can get organized. The men at Dunkirk..." He shrugged. "They are not equipped, they are tired and hurt. They will do little, be able to do little, against the Boche."

Blackhawk nodded. "Does that suggest anything?"

The men looked at him, then each other. "Kill Hitler?" Chop-Chop suggested.

Blackhawk shook his head. "Too late for that. The German High Command would just take over."

"And probably be more efficient," Olaf muttered. "Dis Adolf ... he uses astrologers, no?"

Blackhawk smiled at the big Swede. "Uh-huh, and it is the paperhanger who controls the Prussians, the High Command. He's got them all scared." He put his boot on the chair and leaned forward them.

"Look, the longer the invasion can be delayed the better chance Great Britain has of getting ready for it. They will have only the summer and early fall, after that the weather will work for us. Our job is to delay Hitler, confuse and mislead him until it's too late to invade this year."

"How?" Hendrickson grunted.

The story of how a handful of men from various countries, men who had only one purpose—to stop the Nazis—that is the story of the Blackhawks.

Seven men against the *blitzkrieg*. Seven men against the greatest war machine ever created.

Which meant, Blackhawk grinned, that the swastika-lovers were outnumbered.



## Afterword

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The dates shown and what happened on them are real. So are the German ranks, uniforms, tanks and planes— except, of course, the *Warlion* and *War Eagle* ... which are not all that different from *today's* war machines. The two officers forced down with invasion planes existed. Hitler, rather mysteriously, did *not* invade England when— militarily speaking—he should have. The prominent German generals are the correct ones commanding those armies. There *were* Grumman XF5-FIs.

Many of the names of minor good-guy characters happen to be the same as many of the writers and artists prominent in the creation of the Blackhawk legend.

Blackhawk was conceived during World War II, when the outcome was far from obvious. It was a time when' the European free world was fighting for its life and America was still basically isolationist. Blackhawk undoubtedly grew from the feeling that the Good Guys needed to strike back at the Bad Guys. WWII was the last clear-cut "I-know-what-I'm-fighting-for-and-against" war.

In this first novel of the Blackhawk saga, I have attempted to explain and justify actions, motives and support systems that the comic book version did not do. The first chapters follow closely the original "origin story" as it appeared in the *Military Comics*.

# THE BLACKHAWKS!

They came...savagely screaming out of the sun...tearing into the very heart of the invading Nazi wolf pack.

United under the leadership of the valiant Polish freedom fighter, Blackhawk, these seven airborne warriors vowed to free their homelands from the Nazi War Machine—or sacrifice their lives trying.

Launching their Grumman F-5 Skyrockets from a secret air base somewhere in the North Atlantic, these birds of prey, the Blackhawks, strike a lethal blow to the main artery of Hitler's mad plan for global domination.

A blood oath to avenge the deaths of his loved ones leads Blackhawk to a savage aerial confrontation with the cunning Baron von Tepp, commander of a sinister squadron of Nazi Butchers!

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